

**THE RETURN TO THE BODY IN THE WORK OF SYLVIA PLATH,
ANGELA CARTER, LEONORA CARRINGTON, AND FLANNERY
O'CONNOR**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role of the body in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1985), Leonora Carrington's fiction of 1937-41, and Flannery O'Connor's fiction of 1949-65. Critical emphasis is placed upon ambivalent and paradoxical representations of the body and on the significance of the body as a site of crises in identity and memory. The implications of the problematic status of the body are addressed through a theoretical framework, informed by French feminist thought, which attempts to articulate an exchange between subjectivity and politics, psychoanalysis and history.

Part I introduces the 'return to the body' as a critical inquiry which investigates the conjunction of femininity and materiality and the role of the body in the construction of sexual difference. It is proposed that in Plath's *The Bell Jar* the body is the site of an impasse of identity and memory; this impasse is contested by Carter's novel and interrogated in the narratives of Carrington and O'Connor.

Part II demonstrates the subversive and utopian effect to which Carter employs the paradoxical body in *Nights at the Circus*. As a site of unresolved contradictions, the ambivalent body invokes transformations in identity and anticipates revolutions in history.

Part III explores the 'savage' state of symbolic dereliction suggested by the place of feral women in Carrington's Surrealist myths of origin. It also proposes that a founding violence is discovered by Carrington in the construction of 'woman' as spectacle and femininity as masquerade.

Part IV proposes that the irrational forces of history are registered in traumatic form in the grotesque bodies of O'Connor's narratives. It also addresses a politics of origin which implicates women, as agents and victims, in the violence of an oppressive social order.

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Abbreviations

BJ

Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963)

CS

Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971)

HF

Leonora Carrington, *The House of Fear: Notes From Down Below* (London: Virago, 1989)

NC

Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Picador, 1985)

SH

Leonora Carrington. *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* (London: Virago, 1989)

WB

Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980)

PART I

1. Introduction: A Return to the Body

The theoretical inquiry into issues of sexual difference, subjectivity and language initiated by French feminist thought has effected a significant movement in feminist critical interest - one which might be termed a 'return to the body'. This 'return to the body' constitutes a critical inquiry into the status of the body. By questioning the conjunction of femininity and materiality and the role of the body in the construction of sexual difference, this inquiry interrogates the very foundations of the symbolic order. Such a return to origin invokes encounters with the repressed, but it also institutes a project of redress; the return to the body addresses issues of subjectivity *and* politics, of memory *and* history. This return to the body informs, and is informed by, my analysis of the work of a selection of texts by twentieth century women writers. The representation of the body is powerfully ambivalent in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1985), Leonora Carrington's short stories of 1937-41, and Flannery O'Connor's fiction of 1949-65. The paradoxical status of the body in these texts exemplifies the contradictory condition of women and the feminine in the phallogentric symbolic order. Furthermore, in its return from repression, the body becomes the site of crises of subjective and historical memory. The returns of the body in the texts of Plath, Carter, Carrington, and O'Connor constitute a textual inquiry into the status of the body; as such, they make a significant contribution to the theoretical inquiry signified by the 'return to the body'.

The theoretical project of French feminist thought might broadly be characterised as an inquiry into the origins of the phallogentric symbolic order. French feminist thought situates its inquiry within and against the disciplines of

philosophy and psychoanalysis; it strategically employs the discourses of each discipline to articulate a critique of its terms. This critique is constituted by the discovery that the very foundations of the symbolic order are implicated in the construction and repression of sexual difference; that is, the phallogentric symbolic order is founded on the attribution of materiality to femininity, and the subjugation of the body. It follows that the status of the body has profound and problematic effects for women and for female subjectivity.

Feminist philosophers have suggested that the opposition between body and reason, which is a legacy of the Western philosophical tradition, has implications which have yet to be fully acknowledged. The association between woman and the body crucially determines the problematic status of female identity. Elizabeth Spelman indicates the oppressive effects of this conjunction:

woman has been portrayed as essentially a bodily being, and this image has been used to deny her full status as a human being wherever and whenever mental activity as over against bodily activity has been thought to be the most human activity of all.¹

French feminist theorists have demonstrated that the opposition between 'feminine' corporeality and 'masculine' rationality - exemplified by the mind-body split of the Enlightenment - founds a series of implicitly gendered oppositions in which the feminine term is negative and subordinate. Elizabeth Grosz summarises this argument:

Where the mind is traditionally correlated with reason, subject, consciousness, interiority, activity and masculinity, the body is implicitly associated with the opposites of these terms, passion, object, non-conscious, exteriority, passivity and femininity.²

Such a sequence conspires to ensure women's exclusion from the realms of reason, culture, history and politics. The French feminist critique of this founding opposition reveals how the very terms of philosophical discourse, assumed to be

¹ Elizabeth Spelman, "Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views," *Feminist Studies* 8:1 (1982) 123.

² Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) xiv.

neutral and universal, perpetuate the exclusion of women from a position within it. Hence, the body assumes a defining significance in the project of articulating an ethics of sexual difference. As Margaret Whitford has written:

an ethics which recognises the subjectivity of each sex, would have to address the symbolic division which allocates the material, corporeal, sensible, 'natural' to the feminine, and the spiritual, ideal, intelligible, transcendental to the masculine.³

The association between women and materiality in psychoanalytic discourse presents a similarly problematic legacy for feminist thought. The radical import of the psychoanalytic revelation that sexual identity is not innate but constructed, is qualified by an account of the acquisition of identity which is founded on the suppression of the female body.⁴ Separation from the mother and a renunciation of the maternal body ensures the assumption of sexual identity for Freud, and effects entry into language and the phallogentric symbolic order for Lacan. Furthermore, this repudiation of the feminine is simultaneous with the establishment of the unconscious, to which the feminine and the body are banished. Assigned to the irrational by psychoanalytic discourse, female subjectivity is denied a place in language as surely as it is denied a place in reason by the discourse of philosophy.

Thus, the importance of a critical return to the origins of the symbolic order lies in its capacity to address the conditioning origins of female subjectivity; this 'return to the body' reveals a suppression of the body which has profound subjective *and* political effects for women.

Nevertheless, a return to the body has been met with a certain apprehension: an anxiety that a return might indicate a political reversal and herald the restoration

³ Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, (London: Routledge, 1991) 149.

⁴ Freud is uncompromising on the issue of this irreducible foundation: "for the psychical field, the biological field does in fact play the part of the underlying bedrock. The repudiation of femininity can be nothing else than a biological fact,^a part of the great riddle of sex." Quoted in Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 93-4.

of some form of biological determinism. However, I would suggest that a very proper vigilance about the dangers of essentialism is here misplaced. The return which I have outlined does not advocate a tactical reversal of the mind-body split; such a gesture could only compound the oppressive effects of this opposition by complying with its logic. Moreover, this project engages with the very ambivalence attending the issue of the body by interrogating its paradoxical status. The body, and the sexual difference it represents, is repressed by the symbolic order. However, the body is also structured *through* this repression; it is simultaneously 'other' to the symbolic order and also its product. The body which is the object of this return is, as Grosz has written, "structured, inscribed, constituted and given meaning *socially* and *historically*."⁵

Indeed, a *critical* return to the body questions the extent to which feminist thought is itself unknowingly complicit in the denigration of materiality. Anxieties about the role of the body and feminist theory seem to imply that a theoretical interest in the body is incompatible with a commitment to politics.⁶ However, a return to the body could be understood as a gesture which takes place within the context of feminism's own history, a history whose paradoxes inform the controversy attending this return. Feminism is as indebted to Enlightenment thought as any other emancipatory discourse, but its inheritance is particularly problematic; the gendered opposition between reason and body demands a repudiation of sexual difference as a condition of women's accession to equality. Spelman illustrates how the assumptions of 'masculine' philosophy are inadvertently reproduced in the articulation of women's rights:

Women's liberation, on this view, is just a much belated version of the men's liberation that took place centuries ago, when men figured out ways

⁵ Grosz 111.

⁶ As Whitford has astutely written, of objections to *écriture féminine* in general: "They seem to me often to be critiques directed at feminist theory in the name of the women's movement. In summary form, they indicate the fear not only that feminist practice and feminist theory are antithetical, but also that certain kinds of theory are a positive brake on action." Whitford 4.

both to dissociate themselves from, and/or conquer, the natural world and that part of them - their bodies - which reminds them of their place in that natural world.⁷

To 'return' to the body, then, is to redress the denial of difference which has often accompanied the originating moment of feminist protest. Judith Butler warns against an "easy return to the *materiality* of the body or the materiality of sex";⁸ what she does advocate is "conducting a critical genealogy of its formulation."⁹ Indeed, the 'return to the body' is not an injunction but an inquiry; it does not relinquish the responsibilities of politics and identity but rather investigates their conditioning origins. It is my contention that, understood in this way, a return to the body can constitute the articulation of a problem in terms which are theoretically and politically productive. As Butler suggests:

To problematise the matter of bodies may entail an initial loss of epistemological certainty, but a loss of certainty is not the same as political nihilism. On the contrary, such a loss may well indicate a significant and promising shift in political thinking.¹⁰

The texts by Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter, Leonora Carrington and Flannery O'Connor which I have selected are narratives of return. Scenes of the past are revisited through memory in Plath's *The Bell Jar* and Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, whereas in the short stories of Carrington and O'Connor, recurring motifs announce a preoccupation with origin. Moreover, the body makes disruptive returns from repression in these narratives; it manifests all that is 'other' to the phallogentric symbolic order - corporeality, sexuality, nature and the irrational.

⁷ Spelman 124.

⁸ Butler 49. Judith Butler exposes and resists the implied opposition between an interest in the body and a commitment to politics by refusing either to presume or to negate materiality. "The question is not whether or not there ought to be reference to matter, just as the question never has been whether there ought to be speaking about women." Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993) 29.

⁹ Butler 32. Spelman also suggests the necessity for feminist "theory of embodiment, which must include a theory of the social significance of embodiment." Spelman 128.

¹⁰ Butler 30.

Its returns function as a vehicle for the return of unconscious memory, both subjective and historical. The return *of* the body in these texts occupies the theoretical province signified by the return *to* the body; the ambivalent representation of the body embodies the paradoxical place of female subjectivity in the space and time of the symbolic order.

Within the texts of Sylvia Plath, Angela Carter, Leonora Carrington and Flannery O'Connor, the female body is represented in strange and disconcerting forms. Whether grotesque, monstrous, savage or atavistic, the body seems to be afflicted with a disorder of origin as if bearing the imprint of a symbolic violence.

These representations of the body can be assigned to two broad categories: within and without the laws of the symbolic order. When situated within the symbolic order of language, representation and culture, the female body appears in parodic and alienating form. Mimicking the masquerade of femininity constructed by a phallogentric symbolic order, it appears as a doll, mannequin or automaton. However, when situated outside of the symbolic order, the female body is discovered in states of origin repressed by the laws of the symbolic; it exhibits an affinity with nature, animals, childhood, the 'primitive' and the unconscious. Hence, the place of the body is one of paradox, marginality and exclusion; its position in time evokes the temporality of the past, the archaic and origin. That is, whether posited within or without the symbolic order, woman and the feminine are always displaced.

A pervasive sense of malaise - an estranging bodily sensation of discomfort and unease - is symptomatic of a profound ambivalence arising from the paradoxical status of the body. This ambivalence is captured in the ambiguous sentiments of 'homesickness'. The nostalgia for a home, which represents both a lost past and an imagined future, attaches itself to the body as dwelling place, native land or refuge. However, as 'home', the body is subject not only to utopian yearnings but also to reactionary sentiments which would disavow identity and history. As

an 'elsewhere', it alienates and confounds. However, it is in this evocation of utter difference that an encounter with the 'other', in identity and time, is anticipated.

This condition of homesickness is suggestive of displacement and disorientation; it is generated by the conjunction of crises of subjectivity and memory within the body. The ambivalent return of the body from a repressed place and time, takes place in narratives haunted by the unresolved past. The texts of Plath, Carter, Carrington and O'Connor are engaged in a struggle to take possession of the past which is confounded by crises of memory. If the body of these texts is afflicted by a disorder of origin, then the narrative is afflicted by a disorder of memory.

The uncanny dramas of psychoanalysis testify to the haunting power of the past. Freud writes that a "thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an unlaidd ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been solved and the spell broken."¹¹ In addressing the role of the unconscious in the apprehension of the past, I will invoke the return of the repressed not only in the realm of identity but also in the realm of history. "The Enlightenment," writes Margaret Cohen, "was always already haunted by its Gothic ghosts, and the same can be said of Marxism from its inception."¹² A Marxist genealogy concerned with the role of the irrational, which includes Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch, confronts these ghosts by engaging with the psychoanalytic inquiry into the unconscious and memory. The encounter between psychoanalysis and history

¹¹ Freud quoted in Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of the Surrealist Revolution* (London: University of California Press, 1993) 65.

¹² Cohen 2. Cohen notes that "Marx frames what is arguably his major text on ideology, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, as a representation of a haunted Parisian universe of spirits, ghosts, demonic projections, and black magic" (246). Jacques Derrida has recently invoked the ghosts of Marxism in *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994).

manifested in this genealogy, is also at work in contemporary psychoanalytic theories of trauma.¹³ Maud Ellmann has written of the necessity of such encounters:

If psychoanalysis has often been accused of a disdain for history, historians have also tended to neglect the role of the unconscious in the living and remembering of world events. What history needs is a science of tropes - that is, a psychoanalysis - to understand the ways in which the conflicts of the world are reconfigured in the conflicts of the mind.¹⁴

Indeed, the texts of Plath, Carter, Carrington and O'Connor contest the assumed opposition between history and subjectivity;¹⁵ they demand a reading which can account for the complicity between the conflicts of identity and the traumas of history.

In the texts of Plath, Carter, Carrington and O'Connor, a profound sense of estrangement from the present moment is compounded by a compulsive revisiting of scenes of the past - a return which is announced by motifs of the uncanny.¹⁶ Disorders of memory in these texts take the form of amnesia, nostalgia, melancholy and trauma: conditions in which the time of subjective *and* historical memory are in crisis. The passage of time is suspended and held captive either to nostalgic yearning or to apocalyptic apprehension. Such sentiments are powerfully suggestive of an 'elsewhere' whose uncertain location radically disrupts the temporality of each narrative.

¹³ I have drawn upon the former tradition in my analysis of the works of Carter and Carrington. I have employed theories of trauma in my reading the texts of O'Connor.

¹⁴ Maud Ellmann, introduction, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellmann (London: Longman, 1994) 28.

¹⁵ "The division between history and subjectivity, between external and internal reality, between the trials of the world and the trials of the mind, is a false one." Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991) 8.

¹⁶ "If psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of the frightening things would then constitute the uncanny . . ." Sigmund Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1985) 363.

The crises of subjectivity which are depicted in these texts take place in significant historical contexts. The inquiry into origins prompted by the ambivalent status of the body is compounded by historical preoccupations with beginnings and endings. The temporality of these texts is fraught with the conflicting sentiments of a horror of origin and a refusal of the future, a nostalgia for the past and a utopian anticipation. The scene of Carrington's writing and the horizon of Carter's *fin de siècle* fantasy is modernity: the historical rupture which heralds the revolutions and traumas of the twentieth century. Modernity's myth of self-genesis asserts its repudiation of history. However, such a departure from the past is arrested by the modernist fascination with origins and 'primitive' states which is evident in the texts of Carrington and Carter. In contrast, the texts of Plath and O'Connor are informed by the nihilistic deadlock of Cold War hostility; the possibility of imminent annihilation seems to underline the brooding fatalism of their work. However, the repressed memory of war and atrocity seems poised to unleash its violence and impose an end of history other than the stasis assumed by the reactionary hegemony.

My recourse to a diverse range of theoretical approaches has been prompted by the particular problematic of the body, which confounds conventional demarcations between subjectivity and politics, psychoanalysis and history. This theoretical encounter is staged in the conviction that it will enable the articulation of the challenging issues invoked by a return to the body. The texts I have selected for analysis are also characterised by strikingly disparate styles and status. However, it is my contention that the work of Plath, Carter, Carrington and O'Connor, considered individually and in juxtaposition, constitutes a provocative contribution to this problematic of the body.

The work of these authors is both diverse and distinctive, and yet they share an interpretive status which is characterised by contention. The stylised cynicism of Sylvia Plath's confessional narrative in *The Bell Jar* captures a tone contemporary

to its era, whereas the self-reflexive literary and cultural allusions of Carter's work indicate a postmodern irony. Carrington's surrealist prose emulates the revelations and convulsions of the unconscious, whereas O'Connor's narrative voice employs a sparse and laconic vernacular. The inclusion of Plath and Carter within canons of twentieth century women's writing is seemingly secure and yet their challenging representation of sexuality and violence has provoked readings which have tended to polarise around reductive positions.¹⁷ Carrington's literary achievement has yet to be fully assessed¹⁸ but her association with a predominantly avant-garde movement often accused of misogyny - Surrealism - instates problematic issues in advance. The disturbing conjunction of women and violence in O'Connor's narratives has alienated many feminist critics; dominant readings of her work have neglected issues of gender and politics, generally seeking to assimilate her texts to generic and allegorical conventions.¹⁹

Indeed, the texts I have selected are the works of women writers attributed a troubling extremity of imagination. Rather than employing interpretive strategies to resolve the unease which these texts generate, I intend to engage with the profound ambivalence which they exert. By addressing the problematic status of the body and its relation to issues of subjective and historical memory, I hope to effect a significant departure from established readings of the texts of Plath,

¹⁷ Jacqueline Rose has demonstrated the extremities induced by the Plath mythology: "Execrated and idolised, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal; she hovers in the space of what is most extreme, most violent, about appraisal, valuation, about moral and literary assessment as such." Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* 1. Writing about Carter's alleged complicity in exploitative systems of representation, Elaine Jordan concedes that her writing can be experienced as "an assault" but proposes that "it is the moment of disturbance and anger which may produce a new consciousness and a new order of things." Jordan, "The Dangers of Angela Carter," *New Feminist Discourses: Critical Essays on Theories and Texts*, ed. Isobel Armstrong (London: Routledge, 1992) 121.

¹⁸ Published analysis of Carrington's work has, to date, tended to read her texts either in conjunction with her art or in comparison with the work of other women associated with Surrealism.

¹⁹ Feminist readings of O'Connor's work have taken the form of generic appropriations: for example, Claire Kahane reads her work as belonging to the female Gothic.

Carter and O'Connor, and to initiate a theoretical analysis of the work of Carrington.

The dynamic of return informs the order in which I have presented my material. My analysis of Plath's *The Bell Jar* constitutes part of the introduction in that it establishes themes and articulates problems to which later chapters will return.

In "'I Remembered Everything': The Impasse of Memory in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," I propose that in Plath's narrative the body becomes the site of a crisis of identity and memory. The body takes conflicting forms, as the conformist mannequin and the repressed corporeal 'other', and as such it manifests the paradoxical status of female subjectivity. The body also functions as a vehicle for repressed memory, but the narrative project of recovery is confounded by the body's implication in the origins of Esther's crisis. That the narrative takes place in, and is informed by, Cold War amnesia and paranoia, only compounds the sense of a profound crisis of memory. Indeed, the narrative 'closes' by returning to its beginning; it is held captive by the past from which it is seeking to depart. The encounter with the body as origin in this text induces an impasse - an impasse which is contested by Carter and interrogated by Carrington and O'Connor.

Whereas Esther's testimony remains private and obsessive, Fevvers' narrating voice in *Nights at the Circus* is robustly comic and defiant. In "'Somewhere, Elsewhere': Utopian Time in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*," I propose that Fevver's paradoxical body is figured as the source of radical interventions in the time of history. Taking the turn of the century as its fantastically imagined setting, Carter's text seeks to capture the transformative energies of historical transition. Fevver's ambivalent body is both marvellous and monstrous; as a site of unresolved contradictions it both anticipates and invokes profound revolutions in identity and history. The narrative employs a double dynamic which returns to origins - to the past, the archaic, the 'primitive' - to prepare for a projection into

the future. This backwards glance at history expropriates its dreams and dispatches its nightmares; it propels the narrative's journey towards a radically 'other' time and space - the "somewhere, elsewhere" of utopia.

From the ecstatic trajectory of Carter's novel we return once more to issues of origin in the short stories of Leonora Carrington. Imagining *fin de siècle* Europe from the vantage point of late twentieth century Britain, Carter evades the historical and subjective crises of modernity. Writing within the dissident modernism of Surrealism, however, Carrington's texts articulate a devastating crisis of female subjectivity; Carrington's narratives reveal that the very structure of the symbolic order holds women captive in origin. In "Myths of Origin: The Feral and the Feminine in Leonora Carrington's Fiction," I propose that Carrington's fantastic and macabre narratives of feral women can be read as retellings of modern myths of origin. Revisiting the 'state of nature' and the Freudian 'family romance' - scenes of the origins of society and identity - Carrington discovers female figures in a 'savage' state of symbolic dereliction. In "'I Do Not See the (Woman) Hidden in the Forest': Spectacle and Sacrifice in Leonora Carrington's Fiction," I propose that Carrington's texts demonstrate that this condition of 'savagery' is reproduced within culture. With the iconoclast's rigour, Carrington examines the construction of woman as spectacle, and of femininity as a masquerade. Her female narrators, who endeavour to assume the implicitly masculine position of spectator or artist, suffer a swift decline and fall victim to rituals of sacrifice; their fate enacts literally the founding violence of the symbolic order.

From the fabulous and surreal texts of Carter and Carrington, we move to the vividly realised American South of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Yet in the atavistic landscapes of rural Georgia and Tennessee, the forces of the unconscious and the irrational are as powerfully at work as in the preceding texts. With O'Connor's texts we also return to the Cold War context of Plath's novel, but here we encounter the problem of the impasse of *historical* memory. In "'Strange

Country': The Impasse of History in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," I propose that the uncanny, whose effects are powerfully at work in O'Connor's texts, might function as a model for historical understanding. History is the material which is subjected to a process of repression and return in these narratives; its imprint on the memory is registered in the form of trauma. Bodies are possessed by history in these texts: its denials and displacements can be read, like symptoms, in their repeated gestures and fixed attitudes. In "'No Place Like Home': The Politics of Origin in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," my attention turns to the particular role of women within history in O'Connor texts. A seeming complicity between women and violence in these texts demonstrates to disturbing effect how the association between the feminine and the unconscious can be enlisted in the service of a reactionary ideology of the irrational. Women embody the land, whether as idealised icons of national identity or phantoms of maternal origin. Yet, apparently implicated in an oppressive social order they nevertheless fall victim to its violence.

The significance of a project which takes the form of a return resides in its process rather than its destination. Indeed, an inquiry into origin which questions the very status of origin necessarily confounds the possibility of a resolution. I would suggest that the questions prompted by a 'return to the body' might liberate feminist thought from a myth of origin by revealing the body to be an origin which is itself constructed and produced.

2. "I Remembered Everything": The Impasse of Memory in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*

In Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, the body is the site of a crisis of identity and memory. Esther's retrospective narrative reconstructs past experience through the recovery of memory - a recovery to which the restoration of identity is mortgaged. Hence, the novel makes an account of a recovery - of both memory and identity - whose success is assumed by Esther's assertion "I remembered everything" (*BJ* 250). The event to which the narrative returns is Esther's traumatic breakdown of identity; the body is discovered as the site on which this crisis of female subjectivity is produced and contested. The body is manifest in contradictory forms in *The Bell Jar*: as conformist mannequin and repressed corporeal 'other'. Furthermore, this ambivalence infuses the body's function as a vehicle of recovered memory; although Esther's testimony is made from the vantage point of recovery, the condition of her survival remains ambiguous.¹ The paradoxes of memory and the body are most powerfully expressed in *The Bell Jar* in the form of the maternal body: it is in the maternal body that the proximity of subjective and historical crises of memory is fully revealed - the body is as much a product and victim of the conflicts of history as of the laws of the symbolic.

The ambivalence of the narrative's resolution reveals an impasse of memory - an impasse which is the apparent result of an encounter with origin. It would seem that in uncovering the conditioning origins of her crisis, Esther has not

¹ "Even as she tells the story of how her body and her text turn death back into life, death remains potentially revenant in this sublation." Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 412.

evaded their oppressive effects. The narrative closes by returning to its beginning; the future is held hostage to a past from which it is seeking to depart.

The Ambivalent Body: Constructed and Repressed

A crisis of female subjectivity is enacted in the conflicting manifestations of the body in *The Bell Jar*. The alienating effects of culturally prescribed femininity are conveyed in the sinister recurrence of figures resembling mannequins. In contrast, the properties of the corporeal body, which are excluded from the conformist mannequin, manifest themselves in its repressed 'other': the carnal female body of transgressive sexuality and irrationality. That Esther encounters a choice of bodies demonstrates that 'the body' is neither a singular entity nor a form without its own conditioning origins. Indeed, such a choice poses an impossible dilemma. Both bodies affirm the conjunction of femininity and materiality: whether within or without the phallogentric symbolic order, the body is produced and posited by its laws. This burden of embodiment prompts Esther to undertake drastic strategies of evasion - strategies which only confirm the extent to which she is imprisoned by its logic.

In *The Bell Jar*, the sinister recurrence of female bodies resembling mannequins conveys a sense of profound alienation from culturally constructed femininity. The parodically arrested gestures and deathly inertia of the mannequin conspire to suggest a manufactured femininity which suppresses female agency. Devoid of animation and secured behind glassy facades, the mannequin is both parodic and coercively conformist; it simultaneously mocks and enforces a masquerade of femininity.

At the "Ladies Day" magazine, Esther is witness to the manufacture of femininity as an ideological construct. Assembled out of artifice, reproduced through photographic and cinematic images, and infinitely refracted through

cosmetic mirrors, this exemplary icon of constructed femininity is revealed to be the object of mass production.² Assimilation into this gallery of femininity, is insidiously effected through vicarious identification. The ballet and fashion show tickets, hair stylings and cosmetic advice which are bestowed on the prize-winners by the "Ladies Day" magazine all allude to the fact of the woman's body as a public spectacle, performing for a masculine gaze - a clinically impersonal eye, suggestive of a totalitarian surveillance. Posited as consumers within a market fashioned to their tastes, their actual destiny, as wives and mothers, reveals that they are themselves the commodity on show.

Esther defers to this gaze when she recurringly refers to the authority of the mirror. Furthermore, the archetypal drama which Esther watches at the cinema - in which the 'sexy' girl is punished and the 'nice' girl rewarded with marriage - is performed by actors who are themselves doubles: "a nice blonde girl who looked like June Allyson but was really somebody else, and a sexy black-haired girl who looked like Elizabeth Taylor but was also somebody else" (*BJ* 43). Similarly, the reproduction of appearance in photographs freezes the body in culturally manufactured roles - a process initiated by the rather sinister documentation of their bodies in the 'posture pictures' taken at college. At the "Ladies Day" magazine, the girls are photographed accompanied by men with "all-American bone structures", who have been "hired or loaned for the occasion" (*BJ* 2). They hold Martini glasses as props like a group of shop window mannequins in the guise of attending a cocktail party. This picture is not a testimony to personal success so much as an emblem of the myth of the American dream and its cult of individualism; an example of "what can happen in this

² Hal Foster suggests that the unease attending the mannequin is symptomatic of a modern anxiety about the status of the body in the commodity culture of advanced capitalism: "The mannequin evokes the remaking of the body (especially the female body) as commodity, just as the automaton . . . evokes the reconfiguring of the body (especially the male body) as machine." Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993) 126.

country" (*BJ* 2). Esther imagines "thousand of other college girls just like me", as if streaming off a production line, who would literally step into her shoes: "the same size seven patent leather shoes" (*BJ* 2).

The paradox is that the 'individual' is always anonymous: an exemplary, archetypal figure of ideological imagining. When one of these publicity shots returns to haunt Esther in the Belsize psychiatric hospital, she regards it without recognition. Furthermore, the photographic portraits of the girls with props to indicate their chosen careers, join the succession of name tags and inscriptions whose insistence on a social identity only affirms its precariously artificial status. Doreen cynically exploits this staging of identity by claiming an ambition to undertake social work in India, in order "to get her hands on a sari" (*BJ* 106). However, the rose assigned to Esther to indicate her literary ambitions, suggests that her feminine role in literature can only be as a muse. The camera's effacement of individual agency is affirmed by its sinister effect on Esther when the photographer urges her to smile: "at last, obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy, my own mouth started to quirk up" (*BJ* 107). Her disembodied voice suggests the substitution of a transplanted personality. Indeed, divested of her sense of self-possession, Esther is possessed by the inertia of feminine conformity.

These fictitious attitudes threaten to extinguish life within mechanised role-playing; they invoke a "dead end in which art cannot grow because life itself has become fixated in a counterfeit attitude" (Stan Smith).³ It is this impasse of identity which is unnervingly conveyed in the insistent recurrence of the figure of the mannequin. Betsy is a seemingly innocuous character, but Doreen's nickname for her, Pollyanna Cowgirl, indicates a doll-like resemblance to type. She represents both the populist myth of the home-making frontier woman and the

³ Stan Smith, "Attitudes Counterfeiting Life: The Irony of Artifice in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*," *Critical Inquiry* 17 (1975) 258.

crude biologism of the maternal ideal; she is both the domesticator and the domesticated, a child-bearing animal. When Esther returns home in Betsy's borrowed clothes, there is a gulf between the archetype they suggest and Esther's experience of a differing reality. Wearing a skirt which "stuck out like a lampshade" and a blouse whose sleeves are like the "wings of a new angel" (*BJ* 118), but bearing two stripes of blood as a testimony to Marco's assault, Esther is an awful parody of that archetype of protected womanhood the 'angel in the house'.

However, it is Hilda who epitomises the deathly sterility of artifice embodied in the mannequin. She proceeds "like a mannequin" (*BJ* 104), aptly checking her reflection in shop windows "as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist" (*BJ* 105). In a double process of dislocation, her voice is compared to that of a dybbuk in a play. Indeed, her speech is a form of ventriloquism of a most sinister kind. By declaring her satisfaction at the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, Hilda seems to speak in the impersonal voice of the authoritarian state of Cold War America. The "bald faceless head of a hatmaker's dummy" (*BJ* 106) with which she is iconically photographed seems to function as the trophy of a mass conformism which effaces individual identity.

An apprehension at being absorbed by the deathly inertia of the mannequin is a symptom of Esther's growing alienation. Indeed, Esther's fears seem vindicated by the uncanny prospect which greets her in hospital. The initial impression of a familiar reality is dispelled by the unnatural immobility of the patients' poses; they are like "shop dummies" (*BJ* 149) which are "propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life" (*BJ* 150). Esther feels as if she were "sitting in the window of an enormous department store" (*BJ* 149). When Esther is given a cocktail glass after her ECT the gesture chillingly echoes not only these mock attitudes but also the simulated normality of the "Ladies Day" photographic tableaux.

The mannequin represents an ideal of femininity which is curiously disembodied: that is, its materiality is inert. This constructed femininity is

produced through the repression of female corporeality. In *The Bell Jar*, the excess which is 'other' to the phallogentric symbolic order is manifest in the corporeal body. This disruptive excess takes the form of illicit sexuality and the irrational.

Esther's crisis of subjectivity is induced not only by an escalating alienation from constructed femininity but also by the revelation of a punitive sexual morality, enforced exclusively against women. Esther discovers that female sexuality is permitted only prescribed expression through marriage and motherhood, whereas male sexual activity is granted complete license. It is in this sexual morality that the denigration of the body and the attribution of materiality to the feminine is encoded. Esther becomes haunted by the phantom of the carnal body whose disorderly energies are deemed to warrant such severe suppression.

Esther's fascination is fixed upon the figure of Doreen, in whom the pleasures and dangers of the transgressive carnal body are amply manifested. Doreen's outspoken irreverence and uninhibited sexuality defy both conventional morality and feminine propriety. However, they are qualities which also threaten to sabotage Esther's intellectual ambitions. Doreen's bold and assertive sexuality is contrasted with Jay Cee's "plug-ugly looks" (*BJ* 6). Indeed, the very name of the magazine's editor seems to affirm an incompatibility between sexuality and intellect, in that her initialised title erases her sexual identity. When Esther plays truant from the round of spectacles and performances staged by the "Ladies Day" magazine, her transgression is powerfully conveyed as the violation of symbolic borders. Esther's and Doreen's date with Lenny effectively plunges them from the cloistered safety of their cabs in the civil streets of New York, to the wild west frontier of Lenny's ranch-style flat; his flat is yet another facade - this one offering the panorama of the wilderness but ominously displaying fake hunting trophies.

Simultaneously enthralled and repelled by Doreen, Esther recoils from the dangerous excess which is indicated by a symbolism of dirt and pollution. Doreen

exudes an "interesting, slightly sweaty smell" (*BJ* 5); an odour which is perhaps a harbinger of the "sour air" of Esther's bell jar in which she "stews" (*BJ* 196). Doreen's nicotine-stained hands, smoke-veiled face and domestic trail of dirty laundry become associated with the claustrophobia of the "dry, cindery dust" (*BJ* 1) and "tropical, stale heat" (*BJ* 18) of the city. The sight of Doreen's breasts "swinging out slightly like full brown melons" (*BJ* 18) propels Esther into flight and seems to threaten a more profound fragmentation of self. Dirt represents an excess which is disruptive of the laws of the symbolic system.⁴ Here it is analogous to female sexual pleasure, which exceeds the symbolic system of reproductive sexuality.

However, Esther remains inhibited by society's resounding injunction to retain her 'purity'. She is forcefully informed of the innately profane nature of the corporeal female body by Eric, who compares sex to "going to the toilet" and declares "he'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business" (*BJ* 83). His affected gallantry does not conceal its underlying misogyny, which elevates an idealised femininity by attributing the "dirty business" of sexuality to an 'other' woman. Furthermore, the sexual double standard seems to preserve masculinity in a condition of chaste innocence. Despite Esther's private scorn for his sexual hypocrisy, Buddy retains a chaste aura of purity. Furthermore, Mr Willard is spared the aversion felt by Esther for his wife due to the child-like innocence and purity of his appearance: "the silver hair in its boyish crewcut, the clear blue eyes, the pink cheeks, all frosted like a sweet wedding cake with the innocent, trusting expression" (*BJ* 91). Similarly, it is clear that Cal, despite his bravado about suicide, is exempt from the feminine world of sin and shame: his "baby face" and "silk of white-blond hair" (*BJ* 163) are evidence of that. Marco's "immaculate white suit" (*BJ* 110) only compounds

⁴ See Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966).

the sense of his attempted rape of Esther as a punitive assault. His judgement that her "dress is black and the dirt is black as well" (*BJ* 114) confirms Esther's discovery of the innate corruption of her body.

Sexuality is one form in which the repressed materiality of the female body announces its presence. However, this 'other' body also manifests itself elsewhere: in the realm of the irrational. This elsewhere is signified in *The Bell Jar* by the condition of disordered identity and by the site of the asylum.

Female insanity has conventionally been attributed to the innate disorderliness of the female body. It is apt, then, that it is in the region of the psychiatric hospital that the unruly corporeal body is most evident in *The Bell Jar*. The definition of 'hysteria', taken from the Greek word for the womb, renders the very facts of sexual difference a source of mental instability. Elaine Showalter has proposed that an archaic belief about the mobility of the womb was incorporated into the emerging science of psychiatry.⁵ Early psychiatry seemed to inherit the assumption that any manifestation of female sexual difference - puberty, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause - posed a debilitating crisis for female sanity. As Natalie Zemon Davies has written, on the origins of this belief in early modern Europe, the woman's womb was thought to be a "hungry animal": "when not amply fed by sexual intercourse or reproduction, it was likely to wander about her body, overpowering her speech and senses."⁶ Thus, the hysteric's choking sensation, the "strangled affect" (Breuer and Freud),⁷ is attributed to the womb rising into her throat; an image of woman suffocating on the very fact of her body.

⁵ See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1985)

⁶ Natalie Zemon Davies, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (London: Duckworth, 1975) 124.

⁷ Breuer and Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1974) 68.

The asylum functions as a place of exclusion to which transgressive bodies are transported and within which they are concealed. The fate of such bodies is demonstrated in *The Bell Jar* to be both exemplary and punitive. As her alienation escalates, Esther passes through the facade of identity sustained by the mirror: she declares herself "factitious, artificial, sham" (*BJ* 155). Divested of her precariously sustained identity, she is reduced to vulnerable and abused materiality. Her psychological decline is signified by metaphors of descent as she succumbs to the condition of the body. Resigning herself to bodily degradation, Esther ceases to wash or change her clothes; she characterises herself as "stewing" in the "sour air" (*BJ* 196) of her bell jar. After a fit of sobbing, the mirror returns to her an image of her own imprisonment and persecution: "The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating" (*BJ* 107).

Indeed, Esther suffers ordeals of imprisonment within female structures, from the "stupid cage" (*BJ* 168) of her body, to the college dormitory, the ironically named Amazon Hotel, and her mother's house. The succession of 'madhouses' to which she is confined - Wymark, Belsize and Caplan - are initially imagined as a "big cage in the basement" (*BJ* 169) in the bowels of the state hospital. The increasingly subterranean symbolism of these images of imprisonment conspire to suggest a literal enactment of the repression of the body. Travelling in the coffin-like confinement of Dodo Conway's "hearse" (*BJ* 153) and Philomena Guinea's "ceremonial car" (*BJ* 195), Esther is subjected to a process of live burial. This process culminates in her own suicidal plunge into the oblivion of unconsciousness in the cellar of her mother's house.⁸ Finally, after her suicide attempt - the

⁸ Elaine Showalter has assigned *The Bell Jar* to the tradition of the female Gothic. Hence, the female houses of confinement are equivalent to "the Gothic castle" which "is, above all, the house of the dead mother." Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991) 128.

ultimate effort to liberate herself from the burden of her body - Esther is returned to a body which seems to have undergone the most absolute degradation:

You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose coloured sore at either corner. (*BJ* 185)

The alienated 'person' is entirely divested of identity, not only sexual but human. The cropped head is suggestive of the concentration camp victim while the fantastic flowering of bruised flesh suggests a regression to organic life. Esther's body seems to bear witness to a gross violation of human identity.

Esther's attempts at suicide are drastic efforts to evade the burden of embodying the body. After the trauma of Marco's assault, Esther acts out a ritual suicide on the roof of her hotel by feeding her new clothes to the wind "like a loved one's ashes" (*BJ* 117), adding to the crematory dust in which the city seems to be shrouded. However, it is uneasily suggested that Esther recovers her self by displacing the burden of the body onto others. Doreen is the first figure onto whom Esther displaces the burden of corporeality. When Doreen's drunken and dishevelled body is delivered to Esther's door like a return of the repressed, Esther denies her insentient form. This abject 'corpse' represents the body Esther has rejected; Esther abandons it as "an ugly, concrete testimony to my own dirty nature" (*BJ* 24).

A mechanism of displacement is also suggested in the symbolism of racial difference. Esther describes her alienating reflection variously as "yellow as a Chinaman" (*BJ* 8), as a "big, smudgey-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face" (*BJ* 19) and as a "sick Indian" (*BJ* 118). Racial difference is signified in terms of degeneracy: that is, as a deviation from the clean and proper white body. Writing of the "Western European tradition of subjugating the

secondary body to a disembodied consciousness," Jane Gallop suggests that it constitutes:⁹

a domination which historically depended on other sexes, classes and races to embody the body as well as care for the Master's body so he would not have to be concerned with it, so he could consider himself disembodied, autonomous, and free to will.¹⁰

That Esther in *The Bell Jar* projects the role of being the body onto other races and classes is a symptom of her own sense of being the 'other' sex. However, her attempts to displace this burden only demonstrate the extent to which she is implicated in the very ideology which oppresses her.

Esther's descent into the irrational is signified by her identity being subsumed by materiality. However, on her entry into the psychiatric institution, the emphasis on her subjective distress subsides and is substituted by encounters with the irrational bodies of others. With this shift the process of displacement is confirmed. Esther's evasion of the burden of embodiment takes the form of projection of materiality onto others. Within the psychiatric institution Esther is confronted with a body of Rabelaisian proportions: Mrs Mole, who makes her appearance "yelling and laughing in a rude way and slapping her thighs at passing doctors" (*BJ* 191), fulfils a cautionary function for Esther. This is especially so when, in a parody of Esther's feast at the "Ladies Day" banquet, Mrs Mole upends a tureen of beans and is led away making "ugly oinking noises" (*BJ* 192). Mrs Mole descends into the lower realms of the institutional system, never to resurface.

Ultimately, it is Joan onto whom the burden of the body is implicitly transferred. Joan's previous role as college rival for Buddy's attentions is parodied by her unexpected appearance as Esther's roommate in a psychiatric hospital. Her physical presence is described in terms of revulsion; she exudes a

⁹ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988) 19.

¹⁰ Gallop 19-20.

"horsey whiff" (*BJ* 210) and is perceived as "wolfing" (*BJ* 218) her food and lying "lumpy as an old horse" (*BJ* 233). Joan's violation of boundaries of bodily propriety is suggested by a persistent breathlessness which is both invasive and parasitic: "Joan hung about me like a large and breathless fruitfly" (*BJ* 228).¹¹ Nevertheless, Esther claims an affinity with Joan; she describes her "thoughts and feelings" as "a wry black image of my own" (*BJ* 231). However, she also speculates that Joan has been "specially designed to follow and torment me" (*BJ* 217). Indeed, the function of Joan's suicide within the narrative of *The Bell Jar* suggests that she has been 'specially designed' for a sacrifice which enables Esther's survival.

By manufacturing her own expedient 'other', Esther seems to have been enlisted in the dominant ideology. After Esther's traumatic loss of virginity it is Joan who commits suicide, as if Esther's embrace of her corporeal and sexual body were at the cost of Joan's body. At Joan's funeral, Esther wonders "what I thought I was burying" (*BJ* 256); she imagines that the soil on the grave in the snowy landscape will "seal the wound in the whiteness" (*BJ* 256) as if Joan's death were itself a form of healing. Yet, as Joan's body is committed to the ground, the whiteness of the scene hints at a general erasure of the past; it is suggestive of a suppression of memory at odds with the narrative project of recovery.

¹¹ Joan's intrusiveness is implicitly connected to a lesbianism which, in *The Bell Jar*, is associated with social and intellectual superiors: the "weird old women" (*BJ* 232) who, witch-like, attempt to mould Esther in their own image. The "famous woman poet" (*BJ* 232) who expresses shock at Esther's desire for marriage and children is associated with Philomena Guinea, who has aided Esther only on condition that there is no "boy in the case" (*BJ* 196), and Joan herself forms a curious alliance with Mrs Willard. Joan's homosexuality exceeds the prescribed parameters of marriage and motherhood even more absolutely than Doreen's heterosexuality, which remains within the realm of reproduction.

The body is the site on which a crisis of female subjectivity is produced and contested in *The Bell Jar*. However, it is also the vehicle of recollection of the past. The opposition between the conformist and the corporeal body is seemingly replicated in the narrative structure of *The Bell Jar*: the narrator retrospectively gives a subversive voice to the silenced body of the past.

The Secret Voice: Memory and the Body

The opposition between the mannequin and its corporeal 'other' is seemingly reproduced in the structure of the narrative: it is striking that in recounting her past, Esther adopts a defiant and satirical voice. This spoken narrative, confiding and intimate, is garrulous in contrast to the Esther of the past, who withholds her voice. As a character of the past, Esther withdraws into the silence of the hysteric, inadvertently resembling the mute mannequin of conformity. The retrospective narrative, however, seems to emulate the voice of Doreen - a character in whom the carnal body and illicit speech form an alliance.

Esther's retrospective account of alienation becomes increasingly removed from the experience she is recalling. Detaching itself from the hindsight of the narrator, the body of Esther's past self makes its presence felt through immobility: her trance-like walk, putting "one foot in front of another" (*BJ* 110), her willing descent into the imprisonment of her mother's car and house, her inability to raise herself from her bed and, ultimately, her attempt to bury the dead weight of her body in the bowels of her mother's house. She inserts her body into the margins of the text:¹² "I felt [Dodo Conway's] gaze pierce through the white clapboard and the pink wallpaper roses and uncover me, crouching there behind the silver

¹² The scene recalls the Gothic text of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, in which the crawling figure of the protagonist remarks that "most women do not creep by daylight" (London: Virago, 1973) 30.

pickets of the radiator" (*BJ* 123). Esther registers a mute protest through bodily paralysis. This conversion of psychic disorder into somatic symptoms defines the condition of hysteria; as Elizabeth Grosz writes, hysteria is "the *symptomatic acting out* of a proposition the hysteric cannot articulate."¹³ The hysteric's symptoms animate her body and 'speak' on her behalf: "Hysteria: it *speaks* in the mode of a paralysed gestural faculty, of an impossible but also a forbidden speech. . . . It speaks as *symptoms* of an 'it can't speak to or about itself'" (Grosz).¹⁴ The coded language of Esther's body substitutes for speech. Indeed, Esther absents herself from the text by her reticence; withholding her speech as well as her body, she assumes a silence which affirms an identification with the figure of the hysteric. Hélène Cixous writes that "silence is the mark of hysteria":

The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body.¹⁵

Indeed, when in the psychiatric institution, Esther chooses to identify with the silent, spinsterly Miss Norris whose prim appearance, in high-necked blouse, long skirt and buttoned boots, evokes the image of the Victorian hysteric. Esther sits with her in a "close, sisterly silence" (*BJ* 202) and "brood[s]" over the "pale, speechless circlet of her lips" (*BJ* 205).

The characteristic choking sensation of the hysteric is symptomatic of a simultaneous compulsion and inability to speak. Esther certainly seems subject to a displaced appetite which food cannot satiate. Indeed, she suffocates, gags and vomits; unable to swallow her words, she is nauseated by the "sour air" (*BJ* 196) of her voice. Esther's efforts at articulation are frozen in the moment before expression, her words trapped in a grimace between pain and laughter: "The

¹³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1994) 134.

¹⁴ Grosz 138.

¹⁵ Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?," trans. Annete Kuhn, *Signs* Autumn (1991) 49.

further range of the poems, of the 'cry', is withheld from the novel. Its cries are only mouthed, like grins" (Mary Ellman).¹⁶ Unable to defend herself from the strategically aggressive speech of Buddy Willard, Esther internalises the dialogue she desires in a manner which characterises the address of the novel overall: "I spent a lot of time having imaginary conversations with Buddy Willard" (*BJ* 58). Esther fantasises an ideal exchange with her psychiatrist in which she will be able to find the words to express the very experience which has denied the possibility of speech: "I would find words to tell him how I was so scared, as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out" (*BJ* 136).

When emotion does exceed repression, Esther's experiences it as a form of possession overpowering her autonomy. During a photographic session at the "Ladies Day" magazine, Esther's sense of welling tears is compared to an "terrible animal" which has been "prowling around" (*BJ* 107) inside her and whose irrepressibility threatens bodily explosion: "the tears would fly out of my eyes and the sobs would fly out of my throat" (*BJ* 106). Dr Nolan liberates Esther from this self-imposed silence by permitting her to pronounce the unspeakable and admit that she hates her mother. However, this 'confession' only confirms the sense of criminality which informs Esther's dread of imprisonment and punishment; it posits a social order so coercive and invasive that even private speech and individual identity are policed.¹⁷

Julia Kristeva registers a cautionary scepticism about the interpretation of hysteria as a dissenting language; she insists on the necessity of assuming a

¹⁶ Mary Ellman, "The Bell Jar: An American Girlhood," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber, 1970) 221.

¹⁷ Sarah Kofman writes of the hysteric as criminal: "the analytic treatment cannot be seen as a simple restitution of women's right to speech; it is also an attempt to "tear" from them their secret, to make them "admit" or "confess" - in short, an attempt not to give them speech but to extort speech from them. Woman is not only a patient, a hysteric; because she dissimulates, she is always also a criminal. . . ." Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writings*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 44.

`masculine' speaking role in order to have a place in language. To refuse such a position can be a self-defeating tactic, and hysteria constitutes such a refusal: "neither speaking nor writing, in a permanent state of expectation, occasionally punctuated by some kind of outburst: a cry, a refusal, `hysterical symptoms'."¹⁸ The hysteric's self-imposed silence reproduces and perpetuates her exclusion as a woman from language. Indeed, the hysteric is an exemplary female figure of identity and memory in crisis. Breuer and Freud assert that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscence;"¹⁹ the hysteric is held captive by the past which she commemorates with "festivals of remembrance" (Breuer and Freud)²⁰. Moreover, the coded dissent which can be read in the rituals and gestures of her body is not translated into the symbolic register of language.

In contrast, the narrating voice seems to retrospectively redress the agonised silence of Esther's past: it articulates an acidly satirical retort to the suppression of Esther's voice. It is within the discrepancy between the dominant narrating voice and the experience it depicts in *The Bell Jar* that a sense of overpowering alienation is potentially translated into effective critique. Elisabeth Bronfen's reading of *The Bell Jar* confirms the subversive effect of hindsight in Plath's narrative strategy:

Enacted on a narrative level is a distance between the narrator and herself as protagonist, so that Plath supplements Esther's death speculations with a comic, self-ironic commentary which seems possible only upon hindsight. Her narrative strategy is to acknowledge a complicity with cultural images by presenting her protagonist's fantasies as clichés, yet turning these to excess so as to undermine them.²¹

Returning to scenes of the past, the retrospective narrative converts private alienation into ironic detachment and meets the coercion of the mannequin with wilful masquerade. Striking attitudes and assuming provisional disguises, Esther

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 155.

¹⁹ Breuer and Freud 7.

²⁰ Breuer and Freud 233.

²¹ Bronfen 409.

embraces the reader in a complicity of wit. By becoming an 'observer' within her own life - "I wanted to see as much as I could. I liked looking on at other people in crucial situations" (*BJ* 13) - Esther views events within it as fictionalised performance. The contingency of identity becomes not so much oppressive as radically ambiguous. Esther appropriates the masquerade of femininity to which female identity is reduced and manipulates it to ironic effect.²²

The satirical commentary which is amended to recovered memories by the narrator, suggestively resembles the conspiratorial voice of Doreen who "whisper[s] witty, sarcastic remarks to [Esther] under her breath" (*BJ* 5).²³ In the figure of Doreen, the dangerous pleasures of the corporeal body are conjoined with illicit speech. She articulates what is unspeakable for the Esther of the past and in doing so speaks in a language of the body: "Everything she said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my bones" (*BJ* 7). Norman Holland has written that laughter can function as a dissident language: "laughter is a disguise within which one can communicate secret, forbidden ideas".²⁴ This 'secret voice', issuing from and speaking to the body, conveys the secret and forbidden ideas of cynicism and sexual pleasure. The secret voice of laughter, employed by the narrator, is a form of language existing between speech and the body; it enlists the disruptive energies of sexuality and the irrational in its assault on the

²² It would seem to fulfil Irigaray's description of 'mimicry' as a subversive strategy: "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it." Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 124.

²³ Doreen's monologue emits the voluble feminine discourse which masculine discourse 'hears' as silence: "In the ideology of our culture women are objects described, not speaking subjects. . . . Woman was never considered to be actually nonspeaking. Talking constantly, women emitted chatter, gossip, and foolishness. . . . Women became the silent sex by dint of not being heard." Gallop, *Thinking Through The Body* (New York: Columbia, 1988) 71.

²⁴ Norman Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humour* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982) 84.

phallogocentric symbolic order.²⁵ As Catherine Clément writes of laughter, it "breaks up, breaks out, splashes over"²⁶ cultural prohibitions and demarcations; it liberates from established ideology. Indeed, in *The Bell Jar*, laughter seems to signify Esther's successful resistance and survival.

Thus, the recovery of past experience in *The Bell Jar* is undertaken through the body: the "body is transformed into a theatre for forgotten scenes" (Clément).²⁷ The body is a vehicle of expression for both the hysteric, who articulates a coded protest, and the corporeal body, which subverts through laughter. The body is the site on which an 'other' language is articulated: one which gives expression to a female subjectivity suppressed within the phallogocentric symbolic order.

Irigaray has written of the potential of deciphering what she terms a feminine syntax in the gestural code of the body:

I think the place where [the feminine syntax] could best be deciphered is in the gestural code of women's bodies. But, since their gestures are often paralysed, or part of the masquerade, in effect, they are often difficult to 'read'. Except for what resists or subsists 'beyond'. In suffering, but also in women's laughter. And again: in what they 'dare' - do or say - when they are among themselves.²⁸

However, an ambivalence is announced in the proximity drawn by Irigaray between suffering and laughter - an ambivalence which can be traced to the paradoxical status of the body. Whether as victim or as 'other', the body is produced by the laws of the symbolic order: that is, it remains determined by its conditioning origins. The difficulty in 'reading' the body, as Irigaray acknowledges, arises in deciphering the extent to which its language is absorbed by the symbolic order and the extent to which it is able to signify difference. Indeed, the resolution of the narrative of *The Bell Jar* - the meaning of Esther's

²⁵ "The social construction of the feminine self, fixed by a masculine gaze, is both confirmed and ironised, because the body, as a site for this social inscription, is self-consciously present." Bronfen 407.

²⁶ Clément 33.

²⁷ Clément 5.

²⁸ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 136.

'recovery' - does remain ambiguous; it does not resolve the tension between suffering and laughter. The recurrence of imprisoning and suffocating enclosures throughout *The Bell Jar* is suggestive of the difficulties of evading imprisoning conditions. Indeed, the ambivalence of the ending is expressed in a body which manifests the paradoxes of the body and origin: the maternal body.

"A Private Totalitarian State": The Maternal Body

The maternal body is the site in which the ambivalence of the female body is exemplified in *The Bell Jar*. Embodying origin and sexual difference, the maternal body is radically 'other' to the phallogentric symbolic order. However, the mother is also its ideologically produced agent, implicated in upholding the family, marriage and reproductive sexuality. Moreover, it is in the figure of the maternal body that an encounter between subjective and historic memory is discovered: the body is revealed to be as much a victim of the conflicts of history as of the laws of the symbolic.

The association between femininity and materiality is seemingly founded in the maternal body.²⁹ Indeed, Jane Gallop suggests that the body of the mother is the figure most symbolically injured by the denigration of the body underlying the Western philosophical tradition. Gallop has written that since the mother is the highest representation of the body, then the "mind-body split makes the mother into an inhuman monster."³⁰ Thus, in *The Bell Jar*, Dodo Conway is a monstrous figure with her "grotesque, protruding stomach" and her numerous children who "wobble" along in the "shadow of her skirts" (*BJ* 122) in a parasitic manner.

²⁹ "The classical association of femininity with materiality can be traced to a set of etymologies which link matter with *mater* and *matrix* (or the womb) and, hence, with a problematic of reproduction". Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993) 31.

³⁰ Gallop 2.

That children have a macabre life-sapping quality is confirmed by the vision of motherhood implied by Buddy's "sinister, knowing" (*BJ* 89) suggestion that after having children Esther will no longer want to write poems.

Esther's recoils from the prospect of maternity, which implicitly conscribes her sexual freedom: "'I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick to keep me in line'" (*BJ* 234). Indeed, her objection to maternity is most powerfully informed by her perception of motherhood as an oppressive ideological institution. Esther's alienation from her own mother is uncompromisingly asserted in *The Bell Jar*: "I made a point of never living in the same house with my mother for more than a week" (*BJ* 125). This hostility arises from Esther's perception of her mother's complicity in the patriarchal ideology which is responsible for her crisis.

Esther's mother betrays her by turning her over to the authorities; she is placed within a hospital rather than a prison, but nevertheless interprets her treatment as a form of punishment differing only in degree to the capital punishment inflicted on the Rosenbergs. In fact, Esther's mother cuts a sad figure of exasperating pathos whose anxious advice to her daughter is expressive of a defeated resignation. Her mother's insistence "'don't I always tell you the truth'" (*BJ* 143) is essentially true but this is also her crime. It is her mother's imposition of emotional blackmail which Esther finds most insidious: the "pale, reproachful moon" of her face and her "sweet, martyr's smile" (*BJ* 250) which try to draw her into a complicity of defeat.

Adrienne Rich has written that "the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr."³¹ Indeed, Esther's mother implicitly represents Esther's own destiny. Hence, Esther's aversion to her mother is partially liberating but also trapped within a false consciousness: "Hating one's mother was the enlightenment of the pre-feminist 1950s and 1960s. But matrophobia is really

³¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1985) 236.

only a metaphor for self-hatred" (Elaine Showalter).³² The mother becomes for Esther a body, like those of Doreen and Joan, to be symbolically converted into a corpse: Esther fantasises about strangling her mother, extinguishing the "piggish noise" (*BJ* 129) of her snoring by twisting the "column of skin and sinew" (*BJ* 130) of her throat.

Esther's disavowal of her mother is produced by the cultural construction of motherhood within *The Bell Jar*. Moreover, in the highly specific and vividly evoked historical context of the novel, this construction is revealed to proceed through intrusive and coercive intervention in the body. Esther's misrecognition of her mother as a culpable agent of oppression is confounded by the textual revelation of the maternal body as a victim of an impersonal and systematic violence.

The pervasive sense of the body in jeopardy in *The Bell Jar* is informed by a profound unease with the Cold War mentality of 1950's America. *The Bell Jar* is a novel haunted by corpses and cadavers. Their uncanny proliferation conspire to suggest a barbaric absolutism concealed beneath the complacency of a conformist society. The opening image of the electrocuted Rosenbergs prefigures the electroconvulsive treatment which Esther interprets as punishment for her transgression: "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (*BJ* 152). The memory of the Rosenbergs in turn revives the image of a cadaver's head, which possesses Esther with the sinister festivity of a *danse macabre*: "Pretty soon I felt as though I were carrying that cadaver's head around with me on a string, like some black noseless balloon stinking of vinegar" (*BJ* 2). Moreover, the analogy between private and public oppression suggests a compelling complicity between subjective and historical trauma.³³

³² Showalter, *Sister's Choice* 138.

³³ In response to the criticism levelled against "the way in which [Plath] weaves her personal mythology into historical moments and events, notably fascism and the Holocaust", Jacqueline Rose defends "the presence of these images as revealing

Esther's alienation from society and identity is expressed in anxieties which seem to draw upon a repertoire of political paranoia: the fantastic apprehension of foreign infiltration, mass indoctrination and transplanted personalities.³⁴ However, Esther's experience functions less as a symptom, than as a critique of the monolithic hostilities of Cold War deadlock. Esther becomes the unwilling and appalled witness to scenes which conspire to suggest that the state has assumed a totalitarian machinery - a machinery employed oppressively to intervene in the minds and bodies of its citizens. Esther is conscious of her success being placed within the mythology of the American dream, but the awe at "what can happen in this country" (*BJ* 2) is rendered ominous by the ^erevelation of a differing political reality.³⁵

The bell jar of the novel's title functions not only as a metaphor for Esther's imprisoning alienation, but also for the state of Cold War America. The state resembles a laboratory in which, under conditions of simulation and surveillance, its citizens are reduced to objects of ideological manufacture. The uniformity of mass produced commodities is emulated in the conformity of its subjects. The powers of this state are enforced implicitly in *The Bell Jar* through the family, school and college, and explicitly in the prison, asylum and hospital. However, the effects of these institutions are so uniformly coercive that the distinction between institutions of induction and of correction is disturbingly slight. It is in its deployment of supposedly ideologically neutral technology that the state is most

something of the way fantasy operates inside the historical process." Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991) 7.

³⁴ It is interesting to note Freud's recourse to metaphors of political sabotage in his account of the role of the traumatic event in the condition of hysteria. The traumatic event is initially characterised as an *agent provocateur* but this figure is superseded by the "foreign body": "we must presume rather that the psychical trauma - or more precisely the memory of the trauma - acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must be continued to be regarded as an agent." Breuer and Freud, 56-7.

³⁵ Rose suggests that, in *The Bell Jar*, Plath's "critique of conformity . . . goes hand in hand with her indictment of the political and cultural limits of democracy itself." Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* 197.

terroristic. Medicine and psychiatry are effectively enlisted as instruments of state indoctrination; ECT and electrocution are in disturbing proximity as means of social control in *The Bell Jar*. Esther's "bright, white boxes" (BJ 135) of the future and "long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain" (BJ 68) are both suggestive of an impersonal and sinister architecture. Dr Gordon's "private shock machine" (BJ 169), the "torture table" (BJ 67) of childbirth and the electric chair on which the Rosenbergs perish are scenes of domesticated torture. They are, in Elaine Scarry's words, "world-destroying"³⁶ in that they assimilate familiar and benevolent objects in the process of inflicting pain. The subject is radically alienated, doubly bereft of the home both of the body and of the environment. As Scarry writes:

The room, both in its structure and its content, is converted into a weapon, deconverted, undone. Made to participate in the annihilation of the prisoners, made to demonstrate that everything is a weapon, the objects themselves, and with them the fact of civilisation, are annihilated: there is no wall, no window, no door, no bathtub, no refrigerator, no chair, no bed.³⁷

The conversion of the home into an alien and sinister space reveals an unease about the domestic power of the state; the Cold War is also a civil war which infects the home with its violence.

Such violation of the intimacy of the home is most powerfully conveyed in the sufferings to which the maternal body is subjected. Conventionally situated at the greatest remove from the realm of politics and history, the maternal body in *The Bell Jar* is the focus of scenes of oppressive intervention in the body.

The phantom baby which haunts and polices Esther's sexuality, is joined by other babies - suspended in bottles - which are exhibited like trophies of a predatory masculine science. Their assumed innocence belies their function as ideological weapons against women. That is, they are emblems of the reproductive duty of women, an ideological tenet masked as biological fate. This

³⁶ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and the Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 29.

³⁷ Scarry 41.

'masking' is reversed and exposed when Eisenhower's face takes on the false innocence of infantile appearance: "bald and blank as the face of a foetus in a bottle" (*BJ* 93). The bland complacency and conformity of the Eisenhower era does not conceal its deeply sinister undercurrents. The sudden and unnerving imprint of Eisenhower's countenance is suggestive of a sinister and insidious extension of political power.

Unease about the intervention of science and the state into the intimate life of the body culminates in an image of enforced reproduction, explicitly informed by the Cold War context:

I began to think that it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (*BJ* 89).

This suggestion of impersonal absolutist control implies that it is not simply motherhood which repels Esther so much as the masculine appropriation of it, particularly by a science whose goal of omniscience is especially sinister in the post-Holocaust era. The revelation of the "awful torture table" (*BJ* 67) on which Mrs Tomollilo gives birth implants Esther's horror of pregnancy. Moreover, the drug which makes her forget the pain of childbirth epitomises for Esther the masculine manipulation of women's experience: "I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent" (*BJ* 68).

A sinister complicity between the persecution of the body and the forceful erasure of memory is suggested in this conjunction. Indeed, Esther's struggle to recover repressed memories of her past is set against a collective refusal to remember. In waging warfare against its own citizens not only does the state emulate the barbarities attributed to its Soviet enemy, but it evokes atrocities of the recent but unacknowledged past. Plath's text reveals traces of historical trauma in echoes of the Holocaust - a historical experience expediently suppressed by the necessity of transferring the mobilised ideological and military hostility against the Soviet Union. The conjunction of historical trauma and collective

amnesia in the Cold War setting of the narrative establishes a perilous stage for the struggle between memory and forgetting.

The Return to the Body and the Impasse of Memory

Esther's recovery is asserted in the opening of the novel and anticipated at its closure; the retrospective narrative embarks on the premise that Esther is "alright again" (*BJ* 4). It traces the course of her decline and restoration to the threshold of her resumption of a place in society. However, that this recovery should be signified by metaphors of rebirth and indicated by Esther's own experience of motherhood seems a troubling paradox: it contradicts her strongly professed aversion to maternity, babies and her own mother.

Esther's desire, expressed at the conclusion of the narrative, for a "ritual for being born twice" (*BJ* 257), would seem to suggest that an imagery of rebirth which has punctuated the novel has reached a fulfilment in the novel's closure. Esther's breakdown and suicide attempts are expressed in terms of a return to the womb and so implicitly infer a desire for new birth. In an attempt to purge and cleanse herself after her date with Doreen and Lenny, Esther takes a hot chastising bath, emerging "pure and sweet as a new baby" (*BJ* 22). Similarly, she almost masochistically relishes the punishing aftermath of food poisoning as a ritual cleansing: "I felt purged and holy and ready for a new life" (*BJ* 49). Esther's actual suicide attempt, in the cellar of her mother's house, is similarly a return to the womb: an attempt to bury herself in a nurturing void. The darkness is "thick as velvet" (*BJ* 179), "thick, warm, furry" (*BJ* 180) and like a "black water" (*BJ* 180): she wakes from it with a cry of "mother!" (*BJ* 181). Esther regresses into a kind of babyhood in order to experience the substitute mothering offered by Dr. Nolan; she drinks her milk after her insulin reaction "luxuriously,

the way a baby tastes its mother" (*BJ* 213) and swaddles herself in blankets "warm and placid in my white cocoon" (*BJ* 221).

However, given Esther's recoil from the polluting excesses of the corporeal body, the image of purification which accompanies this rebirth is troubling. Moreover, this rebirth signifies not only the shedding of an old identity but also the shedding of the body and, significantly, of the past. When Esther plunges down a ski slope with an almost suicidal recklessness, her destination is "the sweet white baby cradled in its mother's belly" (*BJ* 102). Her trajectory, within a landscape whose contours are erased by snow, is suggestive of the relinquishment of identity and memory: "I plummeted . . . through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past" (*BJ* 102). The landscape anticipates the snowbound scene of Esther's implied release - a scene which contrasts with the "hot streets" of New York, whose "sizzle" (*BJ* 1) is implicated in the electrocution of the Rosenbergs at the novel's opening. It offers a "pure, blank sheet in place of memo pads, date books and calendars" (*BJ* 249) into which Esther may inscribe her new self. However, it also evokes Esther's plunge into the past and uneasily functions as the inverse of the ECT: "darkness wiped me out like chalk on a blackboard" (*BJ* 226). Esther's assertion "I remembered everything" (*BJ* 250), is offset by the implicit burial of "forgetfulness, like a kind of snow" (*BJ* 250); like the ECT, the "pure blank sheet" (*BJ* 249) of snow suggests an erasure of memory and identity.

Esther's testimony is made from the vantage point of recovery; that is, from a time, simultaneously contemporary to the narrating voice but in the future of the retrospective narrative, when "I was alright again" (*BJ* 4). In a narrative in which the possibility of speech and the powers of language are in contention, Esther's choice of words to signify her recovery assume a particular significance. They compound the ambiguity of the ending by echoing her mother's conviction that Esther can "decide to be alright again" (*BJ* 154) - an assertion which denies the authenticity and gravity of Esther's alienation. Her mother proposes to effectively

erase Esther's experience by returning to normality "as if all this were a bad dream" (*BJ* 250). The uneasy suspicion that the Esther with whose rebellion the reader has identified has imperceptibly been converted or supplanted by a more acquiescent model, is not dispelled by Esther's choice of metaphor to express her 'rebirth': "there ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice - patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (*BJ* 257). Born not of woman but of science, this analogy evokes the Fordist production line, an industrial analogy for the automated production of subjectivity.

Indeed, the return to the body constituted by the narrative of *The Bell Jar* is profoundly ambiguous. The narrative 'closes' by arriving at its point of departure: the place of recovery from which the past is recalled. That the ending of the narrative returns to its beginning is suggestive that Esther may not have escaped the imprisoning condition of the "private, totalitarian state" (*BJ* 89). Revisiting the past through the body, the oppressive effects of origin are not necessarily dispelled. It would seem that the circuit of reminiscence, remembrance and re-enactment remains unbroken; Esther is held captive in an impasse of memory.

The problematic status of the body is exemplified in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Returning to the body as the origin of a crisis of identity and memory, the narrative of *The Bell Jar* nevertheless remains a prisoner of this origin. The encounter with the body as origin, and with the origins of the body, seemingly produces an insurmountable impasse.

The texts of Angela Carter, Leonora Carrington, and Flannery O'Connor address aspects of the problematic demonstrated by the narrative of *The Bell Jar*. The paradoxical status of the body and its role as a vehicle of recovered memory are themes of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Motifs of the body as repressed origin and of alienating masquerade inform the crisis of female subjectivity depicted in Leonora Carrington's narratives. The complicity of

subjective and historical memory, and the significance of the body as the site of the conflicts and traumas of the past, are demonstrated in O'Connor's work. Whereas Carter's novel offers a radical solution to the impasse of body and memory, the texts of Carrington and O'Connor address the issue by problematising the condition of origin and its implications for identity and politics. These returns to the body produce invaluable returns for feminist inquiry; they offer to liberate the body, as a site of theoretical inquiry, from the impasse of origin.

PART II

3. "Somewhere, Elsewhere": Utopian Time in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*

The return to the body in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* encounters an impasse of memory and identity. In contrast, the picaresque narrative of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* undertakes a return whose effects are liberating. Fevvers' body is a site of unresolved contradictions which invoke radical interventions in the time of subjective and historical memory. Whereas Plath's narrative is held captive by the oppressive powers of the past, Carter's text anticipates an 'other' time and place: the elsewhere of utopia.

Culturally speaking, women have wept a great deal, but once the tears are shed,
there will be endless laughter instead.

Hélène Cixous¹

Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus* stages the moment of transformation which is a prelude to Cixous's utopia of endless laughter. Fevvers' ambivalent body - both marvellous and monstrous - is a site of unresolved contradictions; it anticipates and invokes a reformation in consciousness to which both identity and history are subject. Fevvers' power to effect magical transformations resides in her ambiguity as a "queen of ambiguities, goddess of in-between states, being on the borderline of species" (NC 81): as an ambiguous symbol, she embodies

¹ Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?", trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs Autumn* (1991) 55.

"qualities of change, renewal and disorder" (Rory P.B Turner).² Fevvers reveals woman's "unique power to invert her own body" which, writes Catherine Clément, "makes us women want to laugh, a loud and philosophic laughter"³ - a "loud and philosophic laughter" which characterises Carter's style. Fevvers' resounding voice is engaged, whether in narration or in laughter, in the work of beating back the past: not to deny it or to dispel it, but to deprive it of its malign spell. Carter's modern fairy tale is a narrative which attempts to emerge from the "coupling of remembrance and reciprocal persecutions, to arrive in the present and no longer return to pantomimes of the past" (Clément).⁴ Indeed, Carter's narrative resembles Clément's cultural history of the sorceress and the hysteric in

The Newly Born Woman:

These narratives, these myths, these fantasies, these fragments of evidence, these tail ends of history do not compose a *true* history. . . . Instead, it is a history, taken from what is lost within us of oral tradition, of legends and myths - a history arranged the way tale-telling women tell it. . . . It is still acting on us. In telling it, in developing it, even in plotting it, I seek to undo it, to overturn it, to reveal it, to *expose* it.⁵

A double dynamic is in motion in Carter's text: a return to origin - to the past, the archaic, the 'primitive' - prepares for a projection into the future. This departure from the past is signified by motifs of passage; the picaresque narrative is transported through space by means of the railway, while it traverses time and history by means of memory. Tableaux scenes of the past, unmoored from their lodgings and set adrift in time, announce a sense of historical transition. Moreover, the uncanny animation at work in a constant rustling and shimmering in the realm of perception heralds a profound transformation, of which moments of ecstasy, vertigo and flight are animating agents. *Nights at the Circus* holds a

² Rory P.B Turner, "Subjects and Symbols: Transformations of Identity in *Nights at the Circus*," *Folklore Forum* 20:1-2 (1987) 47.

³ Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing, *Theory and History of Literature: Volume 24* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975) 23.

⁴ Clément 13.

⁵ Clément 6.

wake for the past: not a solemn memorial but a festive celebration over which the revenant can no longer exert fear. In subjecting the nightmares of history to a comic death, Carter's narrative emulates the model of historical transition outlined by Karl Marx in the following passage:

History is radical, and passes through many phases when it carries an old form to the grave. The last phase of a world historical form is as comedy. The gods of Greece who had already been tragically wounded in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, had to die again comically in the dialogues of Lucien. Why this course of history? So that humanity parts from its past gaily. (Karl Marx)⁶

Fevvers propels the narrative towards a moment of comic transformation. Fevvers' ambivalent body is the vehicle of encounters with difference and paradox which constitute the narrative's journey towards a radically 'other' space and time: it arrives at the threshold of the "somewhere, elsewhere" (NC 249) of utopia.

"Being on the Borderline": The Subversive Body

Fevvers, the winged woman, occupies a position of radical marginality which nevertheless exemplifies the peculiar place of 'woman' in the symbolic order: inhabiting the border between nature and culture, she represents both the norm and the anomaly.⁷ As Clément writes: "[Women] are allied with what is regular, according to the rules, since they are wives and mothers, and allied as well with those natural disturbances, their regular periods, which are the epitome of paradox, order and disorder."⁸ This function is a perilous one: upholding a

⁶ Marx quoted in Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1989) 257.

⁷ Sherry Ortner suggests that symbolic ambiguity is one effect of women's intermediate status between nature and culture. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?" *Woman, Culture and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (California: Stanford University Press, 1983).

⁸ Clément 8.

structure from which she is excluded, woman ensures its order at her own expense. However, the symbolic power of such a position is also potentially subversive. Indeed, as Toril Moi has written, women's marginality is perceived as dangerous and unruly:

From a phallogentric point of view, women . . . represent the necessary frontier between men and chaos; but because of their very marginality they will also always seem to recede into and merge with the chaos of the outside. Women seen as the limit of the symbolic order will in other words share in the disconcerting properties of *all* frontiers: they will be neither inside nor outside, neither known or unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women as representing darkness and chaos. . . .⁹

Fevvers is a vehicle of insurgence for this wilderness of difference. Crucially, the symbolic significance of her ambivalent body in *Nights at the Circus* is mediated through the consciousness of the reporter Walser. His subjectivity - labouring under the masculine illusions of autonomy and unity - represents the self of the phallogentric symbolic order, which is the target of Fevvers' transforming magic. Walser registers Fevvers' paradoxical body as a harbinger of chaos. He cannot, in Barthesian terms, "endure contradiction without shame";¹⁰ the reporter is made to 'read' Fevvers' body which, like the "text of bliss": "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language."¹¹

Walser attempts to account for the seemingly supernatural by rational deduction. He records the impossibility of Fevvers' aerodynamics and speculates on the possibility of optical illusion, but his empirical efforts are confounded by the apprehension of a double bluff of dissimulation: in "a secular age, an authentic miracle" might "purport to be a hoax" (*Nights at the Circus* 17). Confronted with the spectacle of Fevvers' body, Walser's reaction inherits a Swiftian revulsion. The scene of Fevvers at her dressing-table 'removing' her face echoes an

⁹ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985) 167.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1990) 3.

¹¹ Barthes 14.

eighteenth century conceit of female duplicity. The "huge wink" (*NC* 8) which Fevvers proffers before stripping her remaining false eyelash is an entirely enigmatic gesture. It entices Walser into a confidential complicity but reveals nothing; deconstructed as soon as it is ventured, the wink - which generally sanctions a suspension of disbelief - is itself exposed as an illusion.

Walser's narrative objectivity is thrown into crisis by Fevvers' manifestation of corporeal femininity in the form of fecund flesh; in Fevvers' vast form is amplified the female burden of embodying the body. As a "woman monster" (*NC* 55), she returns to the autonomous masculine subject the feminine materiality upon whose repression the privileging of masculine reason is founded.

Fevvers' massive contours seem to take their inspiration from the gigantism of statues and monuments. When Fevvers' wrap inadvertently reveals a leg and her sleeve exposes an arm, her contentious body is revealed to be neither merely mortal nor mechanical: her "marbly thigh" (*NC* 7) and arm as "finely turned as the leg of [a] sofa" (*NC* 21) are simultaneously fleshly and statuesque. Echoing again Swift's misanthropy, Fevvers' face is attributed a monstrous magnitude: it has the "Brobdingnagian symmetry" of "carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships" (*NC* 35). Furthermore, the "classic cast" (*NC* 20) of her features alludes to mythic figures; their ancient quality attests to the archaic aura of the return of the repressed. As the "Cockney Venus" (*NC* 7), Fevvers updates her childhood incarnation as the mischievous Cupid and becomes the goddess of fertility, an unruly pagan value irreconcilable with the patriarchal emblems of controlled female sexuality, marriage and motherhood. Her bow and arrow are exchanged for the more phallic sword as "Winged Victory" (*NC* 37). Indeed, legends of a specifically female aggression are evoked in a number of scenes: she is a fury when the "Ride of the Valkyries" accompanies her stage performance, she is Artemis to Walser's Actaeon when he finds his "quarry had him effectively trapped" (*NC* 9) and London is transformed into an "Amazon queen" (*NC* 36) baring a "divine pap" (*NC* 36) in the form of the dome of St.

Paul's Cathedral. The militancy evoked by these resemblances aptly convey Walser's sense of being aggressed by the boundaries of Fevvers' body. Indeed, through the perspective of Walser's reeling perception, her "bulk" seems to swell as if to fit the mirror and the room (NC 52), bringing to life his fears of annihilation of the boundaries between self and other.

This aggression against borders takes place in the indeterminate space which surrounds Fevvers' form; it is advanced through the envoys of smell, dirt and appetite. Fevver's potent smell is the most insidious violator of bodily space. "Essence of Fevvers'" (NC 9) contains a "powerful note of stale feet" (NC 9) but is largely constituted of the unrefined emissions - to which might be added her prodigious belches and farts - which pervade her room: a "hot, solid composite of perfume, sweat, greasepaint and raw, leaking gas" (NC 8). Contrary to the perfume and scent of feminine decorum, which masks the materiality of the body, this smell induces a claustrophobia in Walser similar to that provoked by her overwhelming size.

Furthermore, the detritus which attends Fevvers presence becomes a physical manifestation of this disordering smell. The "soiled quilting" (NC 7) of her dressing gown, "horribly caked with greasepaint" and its "splitting, rancid silk" (NC 19) smeared with traces of bacon fat, suggest to Walser a polluting degradation. Indeed, the dirt surrounding Fevvers is invested with a more than ordinary power, emphasising as it does both her transgression of boundaries and her association with the chaos which is contained by these boundaries. The significance of dirt within Carter's text fulfils Mary Douglas's analysis of its symbolic meaning. Douglas writes that dirt is "matter out of place":¹² that is, its identity is not determined by an innate quality but by the meaning assigned to its violation of symbolic structures. Moreover, Douglas writes that pollution is "like

¹² Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 1966) 36.

an inverted form of humour": "it is not a joke for it does not amuse. But the structure of its symbolism uses comparison and double meaning like the structure of a joke".¹³ Douglas proposes that the "symbolism of the body is used in this kind of unfunny wit to express danger to community boundaries".¹⁴ Indeed, the "unfunny wit" of Fevvers' disorderliness is the cause of Walser's disturbance.

Walser is assailed by floods of underwear, a Medusa-like "writhing snakes' nest" (*NC* 9) of stockings and a "slithering mass of silken underthings" (*NC* 53), whose ambush of his sensibilities is charged by their evident intimacy with Fevvers' body. These "elaborately intimate garments" (*NC* 9) seem shot through with intimations of mortality. Their association with female sexuality is inextricably linked to omens of corruption and decay: "wormy with ribbons, carious with lace, redolent of use" (*NC* 9). The champion of these silken insurgents is a "large pair of frilly drawers" which is regally draped over a "clock or marble bust or funerary urn" (*NC* 9), an object which, in its indeterminacy, gathers to itself the full force of female irreverence against the massed emblems of masculine order: time, tradition and death. Mary Douglas writes that the body is a "symbol of society": "The powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small on the human being".¹⁵ The symbolically fraught margins of Fevvers' body represent those of the symbolic order. The small scale havoc of her domestic environs invokes a more profound upheaval, as suggested by Douglas:

Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body. So have bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.¹⁶

¹³ Douglas 123.

¹⁴ Douglas 124.

¹⁵ Douglas 116.

¹⁶ Douglas 122.

Hence, in Walser's unease can be read a crisis which besieges the entire symbolic order; as Julia Kristeva has written: "the danger of filth represents for the subject the risk to which the symbolic order is permanently exposed."¹⁷

In the prodigious character of Fevvers' appetite is threatened the ultimate aggression against bodily boundaries: incorporation. Walser's revulsion at Fevvers' appetite is suggestive of an unexpressed fear of being devoured: it is a symptom of a fear of female insatiability and of the rapacious womb/grave. His unease is dissimilar only in scale to the terror expressed by Rosencreutz at the prospect of: "the female part, or absence, or atrocious hole, or dreadful chasm, the Abyss, Down Below, the vortex that sucks everything dreadfully down, down, down where Terror rules. . ." (NC 77). Fevvers' appetite is formed in the dimensions of a "gargantuan enthusiasm" (NC 22) and the objects of her hunger are such comically phallic foods as eel pies and saveloy sausages. Mikhail Bakhtin appreciatively describes the feast as a "temporary transfer to the utopian world".¹⁸ In the act of eating, the body "transgresses . . . its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense" (Bakhtin).¹⁹ However, Walser warily witnesses Fevver's annihilation of the food, which is "gorged", "stuffed" and "sucked" (NC 22). Fevvers' teeth are "big and carnivorous" (NC 18) and her mouth is a "crimson maw the size of that of a basking shark" (NC 52). Her predatory appetite acts as a metaphor for a sexual craving and Walser recoils from the "vigorous mastication of large teeth" and "smacking of plump lips" (NC 53). The "compelling voids" of Fevvers' pupils draw Walser towards an "unknown threshold" (NC 30) beyond which the dissolution of all boundaries, including those of identity, seem to wait. This implosive disintegration is an inverted equivalent to the 'explosion' of Fevvers'

¹⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 69.

¹⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) 276.

¹⁹ Bakhtin 281.

"bulk" (NC 52). It is this archaic phantom of female insatiability which haunts the margins of Walser's consciousness and prompt the urgent necessity to "keep his wits about him" (NC 9).

The symbolic significance of Fevvers' corporeality can be established by comparison with that of Sleeping Beauty, who is a fellow inhabitant of the "museum of women monsters" (NC 55) of Madame Schreck's "black theatre" (NC 61). Sleeping Beauty could be read as representation of archetypal femininity. In her dormant form, the exemplary figure of the fairy tale meets the figure of the hysteric; she is a woman laying siege to her own body. Sleeping Beauty seems to embody the enforced passivity of women in a patriarchal culture; displaced from positions of power and speech, women are like sleeping corpses, morbidly exchanged between men. As Hélène Cixous writes, of the fairy tale figure of Sleeping Beauty: "she is always to be found on or in a bed. . . . her trajectory is from bed to bed: one bed to another, where she can dream all the more."²⁰ She is a phantom figure whose haunting presence might be read in Mary Wollstonecraft's founding feminist text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, where complicitous women "supinely dream life away in the lap of pleasure, or the languor of weariness"²¹; their supine bodies are transported in carriages - beds in transit - like "pale-faced creatures who are flying from themselves"²². If "prone-ness was [Sleeping Beauty's] speciality" (NC 61), Fevvers is irrepressibly erect; her wings ensure her position of imminent ascension, even, or especially, in her love-making with Walser, and her talismanic sword ensures her "trajectory" in time (NC 273).

²⁰ Hélène Cixous, "Castration or Decapitation?", trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs* Autumn (1991) 43.

²¹ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London: Dent, 1982) 33.

²² Wollstonecraft 160.

In *Nights at the Circus*, Sleeping Beauty's sickness begins at puberty and thus is registered as a protest against adult womanhood, whether as it is culturally constructed or in its biological reality. Her sleep is a way of absenting herself from the body in which Fevvers glories. Like a form of anorexia, her sleep is a refusal of the flesh. Sleeping Beauty is a culturally sanctioned icon and her tears a kind of holy relic, a status to which Fevvers' various bodily secretions could never aspire. Sleeping Beauty's tears constitute a private ritual of mourning which resembles the "festival of remembrance"²³ celebrated by the hysteric:

Freud is surprised by these "deferred tears" and notes that they coincide with annual festivals of remembrance which the lady celebrates for each of the private catastrophes that have affected her. Weeping is like an intimate celebration; the hysteric keeps her tears for herself and seems to be unfeeling and untouched, closed for use. (Clément)²⁴

Fevvers is like Clément's sorceress to Sleeping Beauty's hysteric: where Sleeping Beauty is closed, "a witch in reverse, turned back within herself" who has "put all her eroticising into internal pain", Fevvers is "all open skin, natural, animal, odorous, and deliciously dirty".²⁵ Indeed, while tears seep from Sleeping Beauty's closed eyes, Fevvers' laughter is an expression of her open body: "Laughter breaks up, breaks out, splashes over" (Clément).²⁶

However, the symbolic contrast between Fevvers and the Sleeping Beauty does not function as an opposition so much as - like Clément's histories of the sorceress and hysteric - two tellings of the same story. Indeed, the fates of the two characters are curiously doubled in *Nights at the Circus*. Madame Schreck places Fevvers at the head of Sleeping Beauty's "marble slab" (70) as the "Angel of Death" (NC 70), but she is simultaneously her guardian angel. Both are emblems of the coming century, sister alternatives. Indeed, Fevvers escapes Rosencreutz's confinement to discover Sleeping Beauty occupying her place in bed with Lizzie.

²³ Breuer and Freud 233.

²⁴ Clément 35-6.

²⁵ Clément 39.

²⁶ Clément 33.

Fevvers, according to Ma Nelson, is the "pure child of the new century that just now is waiting in the wings, the New Age in which no women will be bound down to the ground'" (NC 25), but when Sleeping Beauty 'dreams' the new century "'how frequently she weeps!'" (NC 86). Their common 'monstrosity' suggests a shared condition of banishment but also announces a radically 'other' difference.

Sleeping Beauty relinquishes her place in consciousness and language by dwelling in an oceanic unconscious: the "vast, unknown ocean of sleep, on which she drifted like sea-wrack" (NC 64). There is perhaps an evocation of the pre-oedipal maternal body in the 'oceanic' bliss. There is something narcissistic, even auto-erotic in her self-absorption which signifies a potential female imaginary. Indeed, in *Nights at the Circus*, the sea recurs as an image of otherness and difference which exceeds language but not imagination: the "continuous murmuring purr of the great cats, like a distant sea" (NC 106); the "sea of misery" (NC 132) of Mignon's song; the "landless wastes, the infinite freedom of the eternally shifting waters, the fugal music of the deep" (NC 261) which Walser recalls but cannot communicate to the Siberian shaman. The drama of sexual difference between Walser and Fevvers also has recourse to imagery of the sea. A profound affinity between Fevvers and the Sleeping Beauty, confounding their apparently opposing natures, is suggested by their common association with the sea of feminine difference.

The opposition of masculine and feminine principles represented by Walser and Fevvers does not take the form of inverted equivalences so much as *constitutional* difference. In the terms of a symbolism of the sea, Walser is a navigator whose quest entails an existential battle of the self against chaos in an attempt to penetrate the vast unknown. Fevvers, however, is a mermaid figure; a fantastical creature *of* the sea. Fevvers' birth is associated with water by mythical allusions. She is compared to Helen of Troy, who was fathered by Zeus in the form of a swan, and to Venus who, in Botticelli's "Birth of Venus", emerges from the salt

amniotic waters of the sea in a shell. This is the sea in its symbolic function as an unconscious to the earthbound world and a magical agent of birth, preservation and transformation. The skipping rope of egg-shaped pearls which Fevvers is given symbolises the alchemical properties of the sea. Even in the domestic setting of her dressing-room, the ocean seems to cast its magic. The "marine aroma" (NC 8), attributed to the fishmonger's ice, seems to have an especially evocative power over memory and the unconscious. It fulfils the special role attributed to smell, by Walter Benjamin, in prompting *memoire involuntaire*:

the materials of memory no longer appear singly, as images, but tell us about a whole, amorphously and formlessly, indefinitely and weightily, in the same way as the weight of his net tells a fisherman about his catch. Smell - that is the sense of weight of someone who casts his nets into the sea of the *temps perdu*.²⁷

Fevvers' room becomes the site of uncanny transformations: as the melted ice, gilded with fish scales, is tipped into the bath, Walser imagines he sees a live fish and Fevvers' pink corset emerges from its resting place in the coal scuttle like a "giant prawn" (NC 9). Fevvers' voice, to which Walser becomes "prisoner" (NC 43), is "made for shouting about the tempest" - that of a "celestial fishwife" whose tones are as "imperious as a sirens" (NC 43).

"Call him Ishmael" (NC 10), writes Carter of Walser and thereby evokes an American myth of voyage, *Moby Dick*, implicitly equating Fevvers with the great white whale. While Ma Nelson has complete mastery over her "barque of pleasure" (NC 32), the homoerotic world of men without women on Melville's vessel is a kind of ship of fools loosed to the whim of a vast feminine element. Walser's attempts to master the ungovernable swells of Fevvers' discourse are similarly hazardous. This analogy anticipates the disintegration which Walser's identity is about to undergo, as water is symbolically associated with madness. As Michel Foucault has written, the madman is the archetypal "prisoner of

²⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992) 210.

passage"²⁸, no longer the master of his own destiny. Foucault illustrates this analogy by quoting a 16th century perception of the sea: "the hazardous labour of ships, dependence on the stars, hereditary secrets, estrangement from women - the very image of the turbulent plain itself makes man lose faith in God and all his attachment to home."²⁹ This passage captures the ambivalence of women as standards of the home and the patriarchal, civilised contract between men, *and* as symbols of the feminine with its labours, arcane knowledge and communion with the moon all conspiring to madness and blasphemy.

Walser's encounter with the difference manifested by Fevvers anticipates the shattering and reformation of his identity which is forcefully inaugurated by the apocalyptic train crash. The "white world" (NC 218) of the Siberian wilderness, into which the railway ejects its passengers, represents a void or chaos; their progress towards it along the straight railway track is described as that of "tightrope walkers in a dream traversing an unacknowledged abyss" (NC 199). The transformation of Walser's identity is attended by all the imagery which Victor Turner attributes to the transitional state of liminality: "Liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or the moon."³⁰ Indeed, Rory P.B Turner suggests that it is Walser's loss of memory - which mimics the blankness of the snow - which most profoundly initiates him into a process of transformation: "His amnesia is perhaps the ultimate sign of the pregnancy of possibility that occurs in the liminal state."³¹

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, trans. Richard Howard ((London: Random House, 1965) 12.

²⁹ Foucault 12.

³⁰ Victor Turner quoted in Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 203.

³¹ Turner 53.

Walser is transplanted into the "common dream" (NC 253) of an indigenous Siberian people, who make "no categorical distinction between seeing and believing" (NC 260). On 'coming to his senses' and finding himself apprenticed to the shaman, Walser discovers that his recovered Western rationality has no innate authority. His English is interpreted as an "astral discourse" (NC 260) and he is granted privileged status only as "a dement" (NC 252). The autonomy of his rational, empirical self - with its motto "see all and believe nothing" (NC 10) and its self-justifying quest to expose illusion - is itself shown to be illusory, an empty shell of defences. It is through the experience of this crisis that Walser develops the "inner life", a "realm of speculation and surmise" (NC 260), whose previous absence had made him like a "house to let" (NC 261). However, Walser's sense of self is not finally restored until his reunion with Fevvers. Indeed, it is not so much the wilderness as Fevvers who is the real agent of change in Walser: the reconstruction of his personality is a process which unfolds throughout the whole novel. Walser is 'tamed' - much like an unworthy lover in the 'green world' of Shakespearean comedy - and made fit to receive Fevvers' love.

Walser's unease in the presence of Fevvers' grotesque body is the beginning of his undoing. Her overwhelmingly female form is experienced as an emasculating threat. Fevvers' stature and strength comically usurp masculine prowess when she corks a champagne bottle with her teeth; her "stubbled, thickly powdered armpits" (NC 52) render Walser faint with the fear of being crushed. Furthermore, Fevvers is seen to shake out the last drops of water from a hosepipe in "a disturbingly masculine fashion" (NC 166). In her guise as the phallic woman, Fevvers also seems to revive in Walser the child's perception of the omnipotent mother. Her intrusive and impartial interest in his bodily welfare is registered by Walser as a discomfiting exercise of the mother's prerogative. She denies him the right to urinate in privacy and, in tending to his wounds, her bosom looms over him "as vast as its mother's does to a child as she bends over its bed in sickness" (NC 113). Yet when she grips him between her thighs to

remove his make-up, desire overpowers humiliation in a "sudden access of erotic vertigo" (NC 143). Walser's hapless attempts to reassert his masculinity fail to rise above the comic. After being stripped naked but for a dunce's cap by a female chimp - in a parallel 'ravishment' to that of Mignon by Samson - and finding himself frozen like Lot's wife on turning to face the escaped tigress, Walser emits a "tremendous, wordless war-cry" (NC 112). However, his heroics are futile. His life is saved by the Princess's intervention and his humiliation is compounded by the resentful medical attentions of Fevvers which reduce his 'war cry' to wordless complaints of pain. Walser's response to the indignities suffered by his masculinity is a "deplorable impulse" (NC 144) to 'force' Mignon. Moreover, having already been thrown "off his equilibrium" (NC 145) by the loss of his writing hand, his vertigo is exacerbated by falling in love with Fevvers: a desire which anticipates his 'fall' into amnesia and madness but which ultimately reforms him.

After the train crash, Walser is buried beneath an "avalanche" of tablecloths and napkins "some clean, some soiled" (NC 209) - the final triumph of that bank of ephemeral linen which made its first assaults in Fevvers' dressing-room. Not only is Walser thrown back into babyhood - he "toddle[s]" and "coo[s]" and cries for his "mama" (NC 222-3) - but he is reduced to a state of nature: "this man looks as if born in and of the forest" (NC 236). Furthermore, he is transformed into a hybrid of human and bird: with feathers in his hair he "chirrup[s]" (NC 236) at the stars as if they were birds and the shaman perceives him to be a "little bird hatched from an egg whose shell has disappeared" (NC 264). Walser hallucinates "birds, witches, mothers" (NC 238) and remembers a "feathered, tender thing that might, once upon a time, have sat upon his egg" (NC 236); he is not only reborn but reborn as Fevvers' prodigy. Walser's feminisation proceeds with his assumption of a shamanic role and its intimate communion with the irrational and nature. Thus, when Fevvers sees him in his shamanic costume she declares, "I thought he was become a wild, wild woman" (NC 250). The wilderness conspires

with Fevvers to "hatch him out" (NC 281) and to effect in him a "sea-change" or rather a "forest-change" (NC 250). When Walser is finally united with Fevvers he can look back on his former self only in the "third person" and declares himself "hatched out of the shell of unknowing" (NC 294).

Walser, like Mignon and Samson, acquires a "new-found soul" (NC 247) through introspection and the apprehension of an identity based on difference. Walser relinquishes his quest to divest Fevvers of her enigmatic difference just as Samson learns the separate existence of other people's needs and Mignon discovers her dignity as someone who has a right not to be abused. Their transformation is from a state of emptiness to depth: the interior which opens up within them represents a state of unknown potentiality. Thus, Samson's "leap into discourse" (NC 233) is like Fevvers first flight into the "grand abyss" (NC 29) of difference, and this void functions throughout the novel as a symbol of the inexhaustible potential of the future for change. Walser, the "boy in the fairy story who does not know how to shiver" (NC 10), Samson, the blubbing, mumbling infantilised man, and Mignon, the child-woman who has been "beaten . . . back, almost, into the appearance of childhood" (NC 129-30),³² are all transported from a state of suspended development to a threshold of unceasing change.

The exploration of the unknown interior of identity is undertaken in *Nights at the Circus* by means of memory. However, as the circus journeys into the void of the Siberian wilderness, it is the time of history which is subject to radical and transforming interventions.

³² The figure of Mignon is taken from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, in which she is rescued from a troupe of rope-dancers only to die pining for her Italian home. As Carolyn Steedman has noted, Carter alludes to Goethe's words: "her limbs promised growth, or else announced a development that was retarded." Steedman, "New Time: Mignon and her Meanings," *Fin Du Siècle/Fin Du Globe: Fears and Fantasies of the Late Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Stokes (London: Macmillan, 1992) 106.

"Locomotive of History": Departures and Returns

The devastating transformation of consciousness to which Walser is subjected takes place in the Siberian wilderness - a state of nature to which he is transported by means of the Trans-Siberian Railway. As the railway carriages are thrown from their tracks, a narrative launched by the irrepressible momentum of Fevvers' rhetoric is seemingly derailed; its trajectory into the future is arrested in the suspended temporality of the state of nature. However, that the vehicle which conveys the contraband cargo of the circus into a primal past is a train is not incidental.

Carter harnesses the peculiar symbolism of the train as noted by Susan Buck-Morss. Buck-Morss records that the identification of spatial movement with historical progress rendered the train an icon of modernity: "Railroads were the referent, and progress the sign, as spatial movement became so wedded to the concept of historical movement that these could no longer be distinguished."³³ Thus, in *Nights at the Circus* the vehicle of modernity returns its passengers to a state of origin. The paradox of this journey heralds uncanny encounters between the archaic and modern, the primitive and the technologically advanced. In *Nights at the Circus*, these encounters convey the narrative's investment in moments of historical transition: that is, its radical appropriation of manifestations of paradox and contradiction registered as eruptions of the irrational. Just as the contradictions held in dialectical tension in Fevvers' body subvert the margins and borders of the symbolic order, so these discontinuities and anachronisms disrupt the logic of time and history. The destination of unfolding time is made the subject of magical intervention. Both the obsolescence of the past and the assumed course of the future are called into question. Encounters with the archaic

³³ Buck-Morss 91.

and the 'primitive' transform endings by exploding 'origins'. Moreover, the blow which the apocalyptic crash delivers is the culmination of the succession of ordeals which has punctuated the course of the narrative so far. The narrative journeys through the past to wrest utopia from catastrophe. It embarks on a return which engages with the past through both exorcism and expropriation in order to depart into the future.

Set at the threshold of the twentieth century, *Nights at the Circus* conjures with the energies of transformation to effect a revolution in consciousness. As a vehicle which traverses between states of consciousness and between centuries, the train is an agent of this transformation; its symbolic potency can be traced to its own ambivalent historical origins.

The history of the development of the train reveals that as a transitional innovation, its unprecedented appearance was mediated through irrational beliefs which the scepticism of the modern era aimed to render redundant.³⁴ Emerging at the beginnings of industrial capitalism, its first designs emulated the motion of the organic forms it was designed to replace. These 'iron horses' progressed by means of 'feet' which were lifted alternately in mimicry of its animal *alter ego*. This animistic quality lends the train the fantastic properties attributed to the horse: in *Nights at the Circus*, its "rocking horse rhythm" (NC 200) anticipates the shaman's travels through altered states by becoming a vehicle of magical transportation into other worlds.

The technology of the train is intent on a rapid departure from organic means of transport, but in *Nights at the Circus* it paradoxically arrives in a state of nature. However, the return which is being witnessed is perhaps not so much a return *to* the natural world as a return *of* the natural world repressed by the mastery of science. In his study of the significance of the experience of railway

³⁴ I have drawn on the work of a number of authors for this symbolic history of the train, including Susan Buck-Morss, Hal Foster and Wolfgang Schivelbusch.

travel in the nineteenth century, Wolfgang Schivelbusch quotes Heinrich Heine to illustrate the "disorientation experienced by the traditional space-time consciousness when confronted by the new technology"³⁵: "'I feel as if the mountains and forests of all countries were advancing on Paris. Even now, I can smell the German linden trees; the North Sea's breakers are rolling against my door.'"³⁶ Heine's remarkable vision of creeping forests and flood seem to suggest the revolt of nature in the form of an apocalyptic reclamation of the city. The new technology, represented by the train, revives such atavistic fears and fantasies by rendering ambiguous the distinction between animate and inanimate forms. This disorientation is compounded by the assumption of heavy disguises: the interior of the railway carriage emulates the ornate excesses of the bourgeois home. Indeed, in *Nights at the Circus*, Fevvers comments on the incongruity of travelling through a "pre-Adamite world" in the splendour of an "Empire drawing room" (NC 199): she views the barren landscape through tassels and brocade, a frame which echoes a sequence of facades in the novel.

Throughout Carter's narrative, the present costumes itself in the garb of the past. The draped and bandaged facade of Madame Schreck's house and the damasked, velvet interior of Ma Nelson's brothel invoke an apprehension of concealed secrets which is not disappointed. The heavily ornate and somehow oppressive interiors of *Nights at the Circus* reproduce the strange landscape of the late nineteenth century as evoked by Susan Buck-Morss. She comments on the paradox that modern innovations took the form of "historical restitutions"³⁷:

Early photography mimicked painting. The first railroad cars were designed like stage coaches, and the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames. Newly processed iron was used for ornament rather than structural supports, shaped into leaves, or made to resemble wood. Industrially

³⁵ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 44.

³⁶ Schivelbusch 44.

³⁷ Buck-Morss 110.

produced utensils were decorated to resemble flowers, fauna, seashells, and Greek and Renaissance antiques.³⁸

Fevvers is herself a monstrous hybrid thrown up by the age of revolutions. Her radical indeterminacy invokes not only the absolutely inanimate machine but the organic inertia of wood - once vital and growing, now dead and still: "Her face . . . might have been hacked from wood and brightly painted up by those artists who build carnival ladies for fairgrounds or figureheads for sailing ships" (*NC* 35). The "lumber room of femininity" (*NC* 69), to which Fevvers is consigned in Madame Schreck's establishment, is suggestive both of the unconscious and of the outmoded. That lumber denotes timber in particular seems indicative of a society in transition. To evoke wood in the context of the origins of industrial capitalism is to recall how the 'new nature'³⁹ of technology not only masters and usurps the organic world but renders it redundant. Wood characterises a whole consciousness about to be transformed. Schivelbusch quotes Sombart: "'so general was its use in the production of material goods that the characteristics of culture before the eighteenth century were decidedly wooden.'"⁴⁰ In Fevvers' 'woodenness', the barely departed past makes an uncanny return. Conversely, the astonishment of the new is also registered through the irrational.

That the technological innovations of modernity are approached through the circus indicates the proximity of automation and animism, of the machine and the marvellous. While the train is one form of new technology caught up in animistic thought as the 'iron horse', another defining modern innovation which emerges through the patronage of outmoded beliefs is photography. Herr M., a "scientist

³⁸ Buck-Morss 111.

³⁹ Buck-Morss outlines a concept of 'new nature', a term which Adorno uses to describe Walter Benjamin's dialectical understanding of 'natural history': "There have been, then, two epochs of nature. The first evolved slowly over millions of years; the second, our own, began with the industrial revolution, and changes its face daily. This new nature, its powers still unknown, can appear ominous and terrifying . . ." Buck-Morss 70.

⁴⁰ Schivelbusch 1.

manqué" (NC 135), employs photography in the service of spiritualism. Characterised by supernatural illusion and magic, this new science is cloaked in the superstitions of the seance and spirit-rapping. Ernst Bloch evokes this paradoxical conjunction in his reference to the "new magic of mechanism, the cold enchantment."⁴¹ Indeed, Herr M. performs a morbid religious ritual by raising the dead from the other world. It seems as if the science of photography is too early to be assimilated; the return of the dead is perceived as more probable than the technical reproduction of images. Furthermore, at the settlement at R., the "machine designed to promote penitence" (NC 212) resembles exactly the structure of Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian panopticon. Elaine Showalter describes its architecture: "a cylindrical structure of cells with a high central tower, from which a single inspector could oversee all the inhabitants without being seen himself."⁴² However, it most oppressively emulates the absolutist perspective of the all-seeing eye of God. Thus, a supremely rational construct harbours religious conviction.

Schivelbusch offers an insight into the assumption by modern innovations of disguising facades. Accounting for the excessive upholstery of the railway interior, he suggests that it reveals a function other than that of comfort: its function is to camouflage the industrial origins of bourgeois wealth and privilege. Moreover, it is designed to conceal from the passenger his absorption into the circulation of goods like any other inanimate object. As Schivelbusch writes:

the jolt to be softened is no longer physical but mental: the memory of the industrial origin of objects, from railway stations or exhibition halls constructed out of steel, to chairs constructed out of wood. The opulent baroque and Renaissance fronts that cover the steel girders are nothing but, on a larger scale, the braided and tasseled upholstery cushions that render the true construction of the armchair or sofa invisible and thus forgettable.⁴³

⁴¹ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 169.

⁴² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1985) 34.

⁴³ Schivelbusch 124.

Hence, the railway is not only a symbol of transition between 'old' and 'new' nature; it is an agent of the crisis of subjectivity which modernity inaugurates. Indeed, the railway does inflict a 'jolt' of profound proportions: it initiates the human body into the modern era by its revolutionary technological achievement - the "annihilation of time and space."⁴⁴ The bourgeois interior of the carriage conspires with the apparently effortless passage of the locomotive to assure the traveller that he has not left home. However, the hurtling pace with which the engine thrusts its cargo into other times and places attests to the violence immanent in the explosive changes of modernity. The force latent in this 'annihilation' reveals its power in the train crash in *Nights at the Circus*, which shatters identity as well as time and space.

The experience of rail travel played a suggestively significant role in the development of an eminently modern condition: the condition of shock. Carter evokes this conjunction of modernity and shock when she describes Walser as a "kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness" (NC 10): her phrase irresistibly recalls Walter Benjamin's model, taken from Baudelaire, of the consciousness assailed by the shocks of modernity as a "'kaleidoscope equipped with consciousness'".⁴⁵ The train crash shatters Walser's unconscious attempt to shield himself through the adoption of a mechanistic perspective; divested of this glassy facade, he is plunged into a world of absolutely unmediated perception. Furthermore, the history of clinical theories of shock reveals that they originated in the nineteenth century with accounts of the delayed symptoms suffered by survivors of railway accidents. Freud himself employed such a collision to illustrate his theory of history and trauma in "Moses and Monotheism." Hal Foster has remarked upon the significance of this surprising encounter between the origins of industrial technology and of psychoanalytic theory:

⁴⁴ Schivelbusch 13.

⁴⁵ Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire", *Illuminations* 171.

The discourse of shock was developed in the nineteenth century partly in relation to railway accidents, the traumatic effects of which were regarded first physiologically, then psychologically, and finally psychoanalytically. In short, shock is an alternate route to the unconscious, the discovery of which is so often traced first to hysteria, then to dreams.⁴⁶

To read the railway as the alternate 'royal road' to the unconscious is to begin to comprehend its significance in Carter's narrative: it is a route to other worlds of consciousness, both subjective and historical.⁴⁷

The industrial revolution ushers in a new time scale: in Marx's terms, it renders all that precedes it "prehistory."⁴⁸ The 'return' which Carter's narrative takes is not a repudiation of history. On the contrary, a return is undertaken in order to arrive in the future; it is out of this paradox that the explosive utopian energies of the narrative emerge. History inflicts on the consciousness of the human subject in the modern era a sequence of shocks and repressions without precedence, either in severity or in compression. That *Nights at the Circus* is set within this history is significant because the narrative engages with its transformative potential. Its energies are invested in the revolutions which are, according to Marx, the "locomotives of world history."⁴⁹

The train which Fevvers boards to escape assimilation into the Archduke's collection of automata, is identical to the miniature model revealed in the final Fabergé-style egg⁵⁰. Unusually in this narrative, the compression of scale and perspective is unannounced, but the disruption of the sequence of history is

⁴⁶ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1993) 48-9.

⁴⁷ "The interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind." Sigmund Freud, "The Interpretation of Dreams," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume V*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961) 608.

⁴⁸ Marx quoted in Buck-Morss 64.

⁴⁹ Marx quoted in Buck-Morss 92.

⁵⁰ This egg has a historical model. Fabergé were commissioned to present the Tsarina and Dowager Empress with Easter eggs every year: an egg containing a model of the Trans-Siberian Express was crafted to commemorate its opening. See Sofka Zinovieff, "The Jewel in the Crown: how Fabergé's extraordinary art of the ordinary heralded the end for European nobility," *Times Literary Supplement* 18 Feb 1994: 16-17.

characteristic of the narrative. Travel is the metaphor through which the persistence of the past is revealed. Ernst Bloch's assertion that "not all people exist in the same Now"⁵¹ - which is made within the scheme of his utopian Marxist philosophy - might be the password to the narrative of *Nights at the Circus*. Bloch traces a course of history which exceeds the single track of determinism typified by the railroad and its hurtling progress over mastered ground:

History is no entity advancing along a single line, in which capitalism for instance, as the final stage, has resolved all the previous ones; but it is a *polyrhythmic and multi-spatial entity, with enough unmastered and as yet no means revealed and resolved corners*. (Bloch's italics)⁵²

The transforming magic inflicted on "authentic history" (NC 97) amounts to the conjuring of these "polyrhythmic and multispatial" dimensions as if from the unconscious. The touring circus is the convoy within which this journey through time is undertaken in *Nights at the Circus*. It is both archaic and enchanted in its resemblance to the itinerant fair of centuries past, which traversed the limited horizons of its audience, passing over lands so remote that they may well have crossed oceans or even centuries. A "*dream ship* moor[ed] on the dusty squares,"⁵³ the circus carries a cargo from other lands and times.

The philosophical education which travel imparts in *Nights at the Circus*, takes the form of the fairy tale. Its narrative journey encompasses a litany of dispossession, trial, suffering, and eventual reunion. Moreover, it demonstrates the defeat of oppressive forces by "reason and cunning"⁵⁴, the subversive qualities which Walter Benjamin attributes to the fairy tale. Hence, Walser is "like the boy in the fairy story who did not know how to shiver" (NC 10). His 'education' is not a punitive one which would merely divest him of his immunity to fear; rather, it constitutes an awakening to the reality and the power of contradiction. Fevvers'

⁵¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 97.

⁵² Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 62.

⁵³ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 159.

⁵⁴ Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On The Tenth Anniversary of his Death," *Illuminations* 114.

motto is "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive" (NC 279). Certainly, as Bloch writes, the fairy tale vindicates this optimism of the will: "to be sure, there is suffering in Fairy tales; however, it changes, and for sure, it never returns".⁵⁵ Carter demonstrates an affinity with Bloch's reading of the fairy tale as exemplary of a philosophy both innocent and enlightened. Her picaresque romance is imbued with a spirit of hopeful travel which is similar to that attributed by Liliane Weissberg to Bloch's writings:

Hope prefigures a happy ending that is not yet here, but the fairy tale can make the reader aware of it. The story of adventure with which Bloch compares it produces a similar effect, as it is marked by disturbances, interruptions of order. Travel, the knowledge of other and distant places, finds its space as and in these interruptions.⁵⁶

Nights at the Circus is set at the cusp of the modern age, the millennial hinge of the 20th century. Its anticipations of the future perhaps inevitably call into question accounts of origin. Buck-Morss writes that in the "early stage of industrial nature it is no accident that early modernity feels an affinity for the primitive and the archaic."⁵⁷ Not only does the modern cloak itself in the archaic, but the archaic exerts an unexpected urgency. The archaic emerges from the 'prehistory' of the past even as the present is in the throes of giving birth to the future. The 'primitive' is apparent in Carter's fiction in a number of forms: animals, folk and peasant culture, the past, the wilderness of Siberia and colonial subjects of Empire. The discourse of the 'primitive' evoked in *Nights at the Circus* is peculiarly modern in its anxiety about the status of the body. Carter's narrative makes allusions to the investigation into the origin of species made by theorists of evolution. The 'Ape Man', Lamarck, is named after a theorist of evolution but while his humanity is regressive, his 'Educated Apes' threaten to

⁵⁵ Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function in Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenberg (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1993) 168.

⁵⁶ Liliane Weissberg, "Philosophy and the Fairy Tale: Ernst Bloch as Narrator," *New German Critique* 55 (1992) 32.

⁵⁷ Buck-Morss 70.

surpass his place on the evolutionary scale; Walser observes their studies and speculates that they may be "grappling with Darwin's theory" (NC 110). The revelations of evolutionary theory posit the possibility of a 'missing link' between human and animal. Fevvers is herself a hybrid of human body and birds' wings, a "being on the borderline of species" (NC 81), and in her presence the borders between human and animal become dangerously indeterminate.⁵⁸ The circus animals interrogate human identity by both proximity and difference. 'Sybil' the prophetic pig and the simian 'Professor' possess the 'human' attributes of rationality and language while the 'Strong Man' and the 'Ape Man' struggle to attain the human prerogative of speech. Moreover, in the horses, elephants and especially the tigers, a radically other and unassimilable difference contributes to the critique of rationality; Walser is acutely aware that the "high-stepping and contemptuous" Swiftian horses and "could spot a Yahoo when they saw one" (NC 174).

The pig is a threshold creature belonging both to the household and the farmyard. Its pink, sensitive skin resembles that of a human and makes it subject to uncanny transformations, such as the metamorphosis into a human infant depicted in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Yet despite, or because, of its proximity to humanity, the pig is also the most profane of animals. "The ambivalence of the pig," writes Allon White, "is that it stands both for bodily enjoyment (the belly, genitals, excrement), and for odious bestiality. It is hunted down and slaughtered to feed *human* appetite."⁵⁹ The pig's fate is thus curiously interdependent on humanity: it partakes of its privileges and yet is also always available as an object of displaced abjection. As the talismanic oracle of the

⁵⁸ The Countess's experiment at the settlement of R. is informed as much by discourses of genetics and heredity as it is by religion: the inmates are selected for their penitential potential by a phrenologist, who attributes to Olga, the abused wife, a "low peasant cunning" (NC 215).

⁵⁹ Allon White, "Pigs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction," *Raritan* 2:2 (1982) 56.

Colonel, Sybil is protected by the "taboo against the slaughter of beasts whom we love" (NC 248), but a comic incongruity clings to the fragility of her distinction as (human) flesh rather than (animal) meat. The ruff which signifies the humanity with which she has been graced gives her head "as decapitated a look as that of John the Baptist's on a platter" (NC 98-9), an analogy of martyrdom which does not disguise the rather less heroic fate which this image suggests. Moreover, a symbolic association is made between Sybil and her master's belly which seems to lead to her incorporation within it. Sybil stands for the Colonel's success whether as a "pig of gold" (NC 99) or, in less fortunate times, as a "wallet" (NC 246), and his prosperity is signified by his belly which "swells" as if "pregnant with profit" (NC 146). Thus, when Sybil hides in the Colonel's waistcoat from the threat of being eaten she looks like a "disturbed paunch" (NC 248). Indeed, the description of Sybil's talented grandmother as a "moveable feast" (NC 100) is equally ambiguous. The Colonel defends Sybil's exclusion from the dinner pot on the grounds of the similarity of cooked human flesh to pork: he claims it is called "long pig" by cannibals (NC 203). Yet this explanation does not so much have the effect of rendering pig flesh sacred as undermining the sanctity of human flesh. Nevertheless, Sybil is granted privileges which exempt her from the abominable status of swine. Moreover, her powers of prophecy eclipse the already questionable agency of her human companions. Like the Professor, with whom she demonstrates a nascent sense of solidarity, her possession of rationality confounds its conventional conjunction with the power of speech. Indeed, Sybil's delicacy reflects badly on her master with his "goatee" beard, "snub nose" and "mauvish jowls"; he chews as "on the cud" on his cigar which is cannibalistically described as "the size of a baby's arm" (NC 99). Ultimately, at his most audaciously ludicrous attempt to turn failure into success, the Colonel rises "up on his hind legs" (NC 273).

While the pig's symbolic ambivalence can be traced to its status as a threshold creature, the ape's unnerving proximity to humanity is attained through

evolutionary theory. Lamarck's 'Educated Apes' challenge the position of humans at the apex of an evolutionary hierarchy. Their school routine parodies rationality and uses parted hair and the dunce's cap as highly ironic signifiers of humanity. Walser's realisation that their lessons are genuine and that all that divides him from them is the power of speech, provokes a "dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not" (NC 110). The "grunts" (NC 110) of the Strong Man as he copulates with Mignon while the chimps are engaged in silent study, are the ironic accompaniment to the Professor's request for Walser to speak: Walser complies with "'what a piece of work is a man!'" (NC 111). The chimps' sophistication has the effect of rendering some manifestations of humanity bestial by comparison. The Professor's master, Lamarck is quite literally an Ape-Man in his bestiality; he is described as a "dark man out of Lyons" whose "eyebrows met" (NC 140). The Professor contemptuously asserts that "'Nature did not give me vocal chords but left the brain out of Monsieur Lamarck'" (NC 169). Similarly, the Strong Man has the capacity for speech but not the power of discourse. He wears nothing but a tigerskin loincloth as if exposed skin were as natural to him as to any beast, whereas even Sybil is "naked" (NC 205) without her ruff. The Strong Man's ascent towards sensibility and discourse is signified by the fact that he starts to wear clothes.

When Walser looks into the Professor's eyes he sees "difference, unreachable . . . but not unknowable" (NC 108). However, it is the tigers who represent difference of a sublime quality: the revelation of "fearfully symmetric tigers burning brightly" (NC 249) is borrowed from the visionary imagery of William Blake.⁶⁰ Whereas Sybil and the Professor use written language to bridge the gulf of speech, the tigers' only means of understanding, though not communicating, is music. The elephants express their desire for freedom in the eternally optimistic,

⁶⁰ The revolutionary visions of Blake are evoked throughout *Nights at the Circus*: for example, Fevvers aspires to break free of "mind forg'd manacles" (NC 285), and in the setting of London reaches for her "arrows of unfledged desire" (NC 23).

but futile, jangling of their chains and the apes earn their own release by the use of legalistic small print, but the tigers represent a constant menace and are nightly "astonished" by the "mystery of their obedience" (NC 148). Their sensibilities are respected and so Samson removes his tigerskin loincloth in their presence and the circus audiences leave their furs in the cloakroom: "one left behind the skin of one's own beastliness so as not to embarrass the beasts with it" (NC 105). Thus, as Walser looks into the eyes of the tigress he finds a greater gulf than that he found in the eyes of the Professor: an "entire alien essence of a world of fur, sinew and grace" (NC 164).

The tigers' mistress, the 'Princess of Abyssinia', inhabits a self-imposed exile from speech in order not to offend her charges; her body announces a different script, inscribed as it is "scarred with claw marks, as if tattooed" (NC 149). Subjected, like the tigers, to the European taste for exotic otherness, the Princess makes her allegiance to them and inhabits their "perfume": "dense enough, rank and pervasive enough, to act as an invisible barrier between herself and all those who were not furred" (NC 153). Rumoured to be the foster child of a tigress, the Princess recalls other feral figures depicted by Carter, in narratives such as "Wolf-Alice" and the "The Tiger's Bride" in *The Bloody Chamber*, who join animals in a state of nature which admits outlawed femininity. However, her wildness here specifically alludes to her status as a product of colonial imagining. The presence of colonial subjects in Carter's text breaks open its European horizons. They are envoys from an 'other' space: 'savage' territories in which the West discovers land and peoples to be exploited *and* a Romantic myth of human harmony with nature. Both premises are grounded on the assumption of the 'primitive': the concept has historically served both to justify colonial subjugation and to preserve an idealised concept of pre-industrial human nature. The complexity of the Princesses cultural origins - Guadaloupe, Rio de Janeiro and Marseilles - are eclipsed by her stage title. As the Princess of Abyssinia, she is the dispossessed heir of a remote but exotic royal dynasty, but offstage her

intimacy with the wild beasts is profoundly suggestive of exile from humanity. The other prominent character of colour in *Nights at the Circus*, is the mouthless Toussaint, whose eyes are expressive of the "sorrow of exile and abandonment" (NC 57); his muteness is compensated for by the eloquence of his written testimony. He is presumably named after the celebrated Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture, but it is Lizzie who didactically expounds on the irony of the surgical restoration of his voice:

It is the lot of those who toil and suffer to be dumb. But, consider the dialectic of it ... how it was, as it were, the *white hand* of the *oppressor* who carved open the aperture of speech in the very throat you could say that it had, in the first place, rendered dumb . . . (NC 60)

Toussaint's inability to speak and scholarly eloquence is a condition comparable to that of Lamarck's rational apes: the 'Professor' like Toussaint, leaves a written account which attests to the credibility of Fevvers' narrative. Both figures confound the conjunction of rationality and the power of speech and so serve Carter's critique of Western rationality, although the parallel between them remains an uneasy one.⁶¹

Traumas of dispossession and exile are discovered by the narrative of *Nights at the Circus* as it journeys into the past. However, it is through the painful and difficult encounter between hopeful travel and the nightmares of history that a destination in the future is approached.

⁶¹ Carter compares the Princesses "ancient" face to one of "Gauguin's women" (NC 106); just as the Tahitian subjects of Gauguin's paintings represent his vision of his chosen Oceanic Eden, so does the Princess serve to represent a generalised racial 'other'. When the Princess is also confusingly compared to the Indian goddess, Kali, it becomes difficult to determine the extent to which Carter is depicting or colluding in the fascinated gaze of primitivism which erases cultural distinctions. In *Nights at the Circus*, Carter invokes the issue of race and colonialism within the context of evolutionary theory and discourses of the 'primitive', rather than within the realm of history and ethics. Within such a compromised space, the tactics of irony and parody may inadvertently compound the oppositions they seek to undo.

Homesickness and Horror: Nostalgia for the Future

The audacious trajectory of Fevvers' voice launches the narrative towards a utopian future, but this course seems to be diverted by obsessive returns to the past. When the novel is plunged into the primal wilderness it initially appears that a millennial vision of the future has been substituted by the inescapability of origin. Uneasily, the narrative regresses, succumbing to the dead time of the state of nature, as if disillusion with the progress of history has born a nihilistic primitivism. However, the backwards glance which arrests the novel - suspending time and transfixing the 'locomotive of history'⁶² - might be interpreted as the culmination of a keening homesickness which pervades the novel. This is not a homesickness which pines for the restitution of an idyllic state comparable to childhood. Indeed, in *Nights at the Circus*, childhood is a perilous state afflicted by neglect and abuse: Fevvers' youth is marked by abandonment and abduction; both Mignon and Ivan witness parental violence and murder; Mignon suffers destitution and the exploitation of Herr M.; the circus stable boy flees persecution for his sexual identity only to be murdered by the Strong Man. There are no homes in *Nights at the Circus*, as its world is one of dispossession; the profound longing of the backward glance denotes a desire to construct a home in the fabric of the future.

The dreaming of 'elsewheres' - most poignantly expressed in Mignon's rendition of Schubert's "Kennst Du Das Land"⁶³ - does not convey a fatalistic

⁶² The image of the suspended train recalls Rene Magritte's "Time Suspended".

Moreover, the engine stalled in the wilderness and absorbed into nature evokes the "photograph of a speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of a virgin forest" with which Breton illustrated his concept of 'convulsive beauty' (quoted in Foster 25).

⁶³ Carolyn Steedman suggests a resemblance between Schubert's "Kennst Du Das Land" and "Home Sweet Home," and explores the motivation behind a widespread scholarly impulse to identify Mignon: "The search for Mignon's origins . . . is about the desire to give the child a home: to find her a home in the world: to give her a history, a psychology." Steedman 111.

melancholy so much as a radical yearning for the future: it is a nostalgia for a utopian future anticipated but not yet comprehended. Christopher Norris notes that utopian thought is conventionally dismissed as "a kind of infantile disorder, an escape from the realities of social existence."⁶⁴ However, the history of homes in Carter's narrative ensures that sentimental nostalgia cannot exert its insipid spell over the brutal reality of experience. The state signified by 'home' occupies a powerful place in utopian thinking: it is "the house in which one would be at home, inside, no longer estranged" (Theodor Adorno).⁶⁵ Adorno is describing its significance in the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, who transforms a subjective affect into a vehicle of materialist enlightenment:

Once man has comprehended himself and has established his own domain in real democracy, without depersonalisation and alienation, something arises in the world which all men have glimpsed in childhood: a place and a state in which no one has yet been. And the name of this something is home. . . . (Bloch)⁶⁶

The backwards glance, in this account of utopian thought and in the narrative of *Nights at the Circus*, is a safeguard against forgetfulness. It prepares the way for the future by confronting the contradictions of the past. As Susan Buck-Morss writes:

A construction of history that looks backward, rather than forward, at the destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*, provides dialectical contrast to the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what happened).⁶⁷

Bloch's 'home' is both familiar and unknown; familiar to the utopian yearnings of humanity throughout time, but unknown as it has yet to be made a reality.

A concept of history which emphasises the recovery of the past, the persistence of memory, and the importance of remembering, has an affinity with the project

⁶⁴ Christopher Norris, "Marxist or Utopian? - The Philosophy of Ernst Bloch," *Literature and History* 9:2 (1983) 240.

⁶⁵ Theodor Adorno, "Ernst Bloch's 'Spuren': On The Revised Edition of 1959," *Notes to Literature: Volume One* (New York Columbia University Press, 1991) 205.

⁶⁶ Ernst Bloch, *On Karl Marx* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) 44-5.

⁶⁷ Buck-Morss 95.

of psychoanalytic thought. Commenting on this analogy, Maud Ellmann first notes the pervasive "prohibition of the backward glance" in the classical mythology to which Freud's writing is so indebted: "Lot's wife turns into a pillar of salt when she looks back at her homeland left behind; Orpheus is permitted to conduct Eurydice out of the underworld only under the condition that he does not look back at her."⁶⁸ The revolution effected by psychoanalysis is to defy this prohibition: a return to the past is ventured which braves the risk of blinding and dismemberment. Ellmann writes that it is in the "*process* of discovery rather than the crimes revealed"⁶⁹ that the power of psychoanalysis resides: "its terror lies in the interpretative activity itself, the sheer audacity of looking back into the past and rediscovering the violence of childhood."⁷⁰

In *Nights at the Circus*, the backward glance is not easy or complacent but perilous and painful. Indeed, it risks devastation. The narrative foregoes the fear of petrification to cast an unflinching gaze on horrors, but this unforgiving quest is undertaken with a redemption in mind. The reanimation of the past in *Nights at the Circus* has two functions which work in parallel towards a utopian destination: the exorcism of the past and the reclamation of utopian anticipations. It seeks to fulfil ancient dreams and dispel present nightmares. To draw an analogy once more with Bloch's philosophical project, with which Carter's text demonstrates such an affinity, Anson Rabinbach's comments seem applicable to the novel:

[It is] a critique of nihilism and a restoration of utopia to its original meaning as an immanent force, a 'waking dream' of the possible. . . . Nihilism accepts only the homelessness of mankind and resigns itself before the loss of the other worldly.⁷¹

⁶⁸ Maud Ellmann, introduction, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellmann (London: Longman, 1994) 9.

⁶⁹ Ellmann 8-9.

⁷⁰ Ellmann 9.

⁷¹ Anson Rabinbach, "Unclaimed Heritage: Ernst Bloch's *Heritage Of Our Times* and the Theory of Fascism," *New German Critique* 11 (1977) 7-8.

As the narrative leaves London, Walser adopts the tone of a dilettantish host - "let me invite you to spend a few nights at the circus" (NC 91) - as if assuming the role of a master of ceremonies presiding over scenes of trifling diversion. Indeed, a panoramic procession of scenes from the past are summoned as if projected by a magic lantern.⁷² However, the catastrophe of the railway crash explodes any sense of complacent spectatorship. Moreover, it is the culmination of glimpses of horror on which the course of the narrative has already stalled. Incidental to the picaresque progress of the novel are a sequence of scenes of women's oppression. These tableaux represent images of women frozen in postures of subjection. The vestal hearth of Ma Nelson's rational brothel, with its "brace of buxom, smiling goddesses" (NC 26), is succeeded by the crypt and "black theatre" (NC 61) of Madame Schreck's "museum of woman monsters" (NC 55), who stand in "profane altars" (NC 61), by Rosencreutz's Gothic mansion in which Fevvers' symbolism renders her expendable, by the alcove in which Mignon "impersonate[s] the dead" (NC 138), and by the cells "lit up like so many small theatres" (NC 211) in the women's asylum.

These suspended figures are held captive by a Gothic narrative of persecution and imprisonment to which Fevvers' childhood career as a 'living statue' belongs: Fevvers admits, "I played the living statue all my girlhood" (NC 26). Walser's hypothesis that Fevvers may be a "marvellous machine" (29) or "an ingenious mechanism" (NC 43), conjures such figures as Galatea, Pygmalion and E.T.A Hoffmann's Olympia - uncanny statues and dolls which all attest to a deadly inertia in ideal femininity. The visionary brothel-keeper, Ma Nelson, casts Fevvers as 'Victory with Wings': an image of woman triumphant. However, this guise is experienced as a kind of live burial in the shell from which she emerged.

⁷² "As the traveler steps out of that space, it beomes a stage setting, or a series of such pictures or scenes created by the continously changing perspective. Panoramic perception, in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belongs to the same space as the perceived objects." Schivelbusch 66.

The make-up and costume form an "artificial egg", a "death mask", and a "sarcophagus" (NC 39). It is this image which Madame Schreck appropriates and converts into the Angel of Death. Fevvers undergoes an even more literal live burial within Schreck's crypt, known both as Down Below and as The Abyss, which is a symbol of female sexuality in this house of terrors. Schreck herself is described by Toussaint as "some kind of wicked puppet that pulled its own strings" (NC 58): her previous career as a 'Living Skeleton' suggests she is a kind of animated corpse. Indeed, all that remains after her death are bones within her clothes which are "stiff and dry as the shed carapace of an insect" (NC 85).

Perhaps the most chilling ordeal which Fevvers endures is inflicted by the Grand Duke, who appears to take literally the rumour that she is not a woman but a "cunningly constructed automaton made up of whalebone, india-rubber and springs" (NC 147): he plots to induct her into his collection of mechanical toys. These figures represent creatures curiously in bondage to their own bodies. The bird whose beak is substituted by a flute is possibly a nightingale and so evokes the image of the raped and mutilated Philomel and her agony of stolen speech. The woman-harp's strings in place of her torso make a similarly brutalised music from the wound-like absence where her breasts, belly and hips should be.

The Archduke's puppet musicians in *Nights at the Circus* resemble Jacques Vaucanson's famous automatons - a flautist, drummer and duck - which were presented to the Académie Royale Des Sciences in 1738; objects of wonder and incredible technical skill, they represented a union of fantasy and technology. Indeed, Jean-Claude Beaune has written of the earliest automata that they represented "the dream, the ideal form, the utopia of the machine, which endows them from the first with an anthropomorphous or living quality."⁷³ However, the

⁷³ Jean-Claude Beaune, "The Classical Age of Automata: An Impressionistic Survey From The Seventeenth Century to the Nineteenth Century," trans. Ian Patterson, *Fragments For a History of the Human Body: Part One*, ed. Michel Feher with Romona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (London: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1989) 431.

automata is here less marvellous than alienating. The 'black theatre' of Madame Schreck's brothel, whose very name evokes a dark romanticism, belongs^{to} the grotesque as defined by Wolfgang Kayser. This grotesque characteristically confounds the animate and inanimate:

The mechanical object is alienated by being brought to life, the human being by being deprived of it. Among the most persistent motifs of the grotesque we find human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes, and automata, and their faces frozen into masks.⁷⁴

The uncanny automata signify a peculiarly modern alienation prompted, perhaps, by the steadily advancing usurpation of the machine: that is, the 'living statue' which threatens to eclipse human agency.⁷⁵

Horror is an index of Fevvers' symbolic power. The abysmal aspect it registers in the perspective of Walser should not be dispelled merely as a symptom of his neurosis. It is an index of the actual suffering which she endures *and* a symptom of a historical crisis which may yield chaos or revolution. Bakhtin writes of the grotesque image that it "reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis."⁷⁶ However, he denies the modern grotesque the subversive power he attributes to the Renaissance carnivalesque. He ascribes its decline to the legacy of Romanticism:

The world of Romantic grotesque is to a certain extent a terrifying world, alien to man. All that is ordinary, commonplace, belonging to everyday life, and recognised by all suddenly becomes meaningless, dubious and hostile. Our own world becomes an alien world. Something frightening is revealed in that which was habitual and secure.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 183.

⁷⁵ Hal Foster points out that the 'marvellous machines' of Enlightenment invention and the origins of mass manufacture meet in the figure of Vaucanson: Vaucanson was also the designer of a silk factory in 1756 which is considered to be the first modern industrial plant.

⁷⁶ Bakhtin 24.

⁷⁷ Bakhtin 38-9.

Bakhtin seems to attribute this sense of alienation to a wilful distortion on the part of the Romantic imagination. However, it could be argued that Romanticism is here anticipating a sense of alienation which is characteristic of the emerging modern world - what appears, in all its novelty and idiosyncrasy, to be a perverse subjective experience carries a historical dimension. Bakhtin does seem to acknowledge this quality when he writes that "the grotesque, including the Romantic form, discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life."⁷⁸

Bakhtin's work is inflected with a powerful and often lyrical nostalgia for a lost world:⁷⁹ *Nights at the Circus* is a fiction similarly preoccupied with utopia but one which incorporates a scepticism about nostalgia *and* futuristic prescription. It seeks to approach the future through the contradictions of the past - a kind of harrowing of history. In *Nights at the Circus*, each framed scene is shed, like the killing of an old identity, by the narrative progress of the novel. Through this sacrifice each oppression is shown to be contingent, an ideological illusion which will vanish with the cessation of belief. Ma Nelson's brothel, about to be turned into a home for fallen women, is seen to "waver" and "dissolve" (NC 49) and is committed to a sacrificial funeral pyre. Madame Schreck similarly vanishes, leaving only dry bones within her clothes as if she had been "agitated only by the power of an infernal will" (NC 84). Fevvers escapes both Rosencreutz and the Grand Duke by an act of the supernatural which supersedes any temporal exercise of power. Finally, the 'army of lovers' break the spell of their confinement

⁷⁸ Bakhtin 48.

⁷⁹ Bakhtin's evokes this history through a literary representation which could be read as a loving eulogy to a culture whose very transcription into literary form marks its passing. Stephen Greenblatt has issued a cautionary note against "simply equating Renaissance popular culture with Rabelais's novel": "*Gargantua and Pantagruel* is not carnival, but the brilliant aesthetic representation of carnival motifs: not the communal laughter of a largely illiterate populace, but the highly crafted, classicising comedy of a supremely literate individual; not festive mayhem in the streets, but words on a page." Greenblatt 7-8.

simply by a "one, great united look of accusation" (218) as if to return the look of the oppressor - and escape the subjection of the gaze - is an act as invested with magical power as the act of naming. The staging and banishing of these dramas might be modelled upon the outline of revolutionary historical progress articulated in Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte". Marx famously asserts that the "tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living".⁸⁰ He implies that in order to achieve a revolution which is genuinely radical, the ghosts of past oppression must be exorcised - it is to this end that the past is revisited in Carter's narrative. *Nights at the Circus* is certainly haunted by history, though some of its ghosts are not yet dead and one significant spectre about to be born.⁸¹

At the turn of the twentieth century, the rapid and escalating pace of modernity consigns even the recent past - that of the preceding generation - to historical redundancy. The plush bourgeois interiors in which the unnatural acts of past oppressions take place in *Nights at the Circus*, exert an uncanny spell which could be interpreted through Walter Benjamin's concept of the outmoded. For Benjamin, the peculiar enchantment of outmoded forms in the disenchanted modern world attest to the haunting power of the past and the radical potential of the irrational.⁸² Benjamin attributes the discovery of the category of the outmoded to André Breton and the Surrealists, who enlisted both Freud and Marx to their *avant garde* project. The Surrealists returned with wonder to the lost world of their childhood. This return echoes throughout Carter's narrative, which is itself

⁸⁰ Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," *Selected Works* (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1968) 96.

⁸¹ "A spectre is haunting Europe - the spectre of Communism". Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels *The Communist Manifesto Penguin* (London: Penguin, 1967) 78.

⁸² Margaret Cohen designates Benjamin's thought as Gothic Marxism: the term describes a "genealogy fascinated with the irrational aspects of social process, a genealogy that both investigates how the irrational pervades existing society and dreams of using it to effect social change." Cohen, *Profane Illuminations: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (London: University of California Press, 1993) 1-2.

set within the metamorphic transition of the 19th century into the modern era - that is, the mythical world of the Surrealists' childhood.⁸³ Benjamin writes:

[Breton] was the first to perceive the revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded", in the first iron constructions, the first factory buildings, the earliest photos, the objects that have begun to be extinct. . . . No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution - not only social but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects - can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism.⁸⁴

These are the interiors of Fevvers' youth, past but not dead; they still cast such a baleful spell that to return to them, even in memory, is to undergo a harrowing of the past. The compressed force of history lies revealed in the 'outmoded': in the outmoded is revealed modernity's capacity to throw up revolutions in form and to consign them swiftly to extinction.

Benjamin's "One-Way Street", his most experimental and Surrealist-inspired work, tours the densely claustrophobic bourgeois home and its ill-concealed secrets by nauseous gaslight. The foreboding provoked by the cellar in Benjamin's account is vindicated by the horror of Madame Schreck's 'black theatre' in *Nights at the Circus*: "What things were interred and sacrificed amid magic incantations, what horrible cabinet of curiosities lies there below, where the

⁸³ In "The Alchemy of the Word", Carter professes an affinity with Surrealism; the range of the marvelous in the narrative of *Nights at the Circus* certainly seems infused with a Surrealist spirit: "Surrealism celebrated wonder, the capacity for seeing the world as if for the first time which, in its purest state, is the prerogative of children and madmen, but more than that, it celebrated wonder itself as an essential means of perception. Yet not a naive wonder. The surrealists did not live in naive times. A premonition of the imminent end of the world is always a shot in the arm for the arts; if the world has, in fact, just ended, what then? The 1914-18 war was, in many respects, for France and Germany, indeed the end of the world. . . . However, the Russian Revolution of 1917 suggested the end of one world might mark the commencement of another world. . . ." Carter, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992) 67. In the "somewhere, elsewhere" (NC 249) of Carter's text, there might be heard an echo of the concluding declaration of Breton's 1924 "Manifesto of Surrealism": "Existence is elsewhere." André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1972) 47.

⁸⁴ Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979) 229.

deepest shafts are reserved for what is most commonplace (Benjamin)."⁸⁵ Carter's 'cabinet of curiosities' is the 'lumber room of femininity'. It is visited by men who are pillars of the establishment and who act out their authority in perverse form - the foundation of Victorian propriety gapes and seethes beneath the feet of respectable society. Benjamin's 'horror of apartments' also evokes the cruelties inflicted in *Nights at the Circus*, amid dense curtains and shadowy alcoves, by Herr M. The suffocating interiors surreptitiously extinguish life just as surely as the epidemics out of which Herr M.'s ghost photography profits:

The bourgeois interior of the 1860s to the 1890's, with its gigantic sideboards distended with carvings, the sunless corners where palms stand, the balcony embattled behind its balustrade, and the long corridors with their singing gas flames, fittingly houses only the corpse.⁸⁶

In *Nights at the Circus*, the corpse is the child-woman Mignon: made to mimic the living dead, weeping over the memory of her dead mother traced in her own portrait and beaten back into infancy by abuse.

The past is conjured in *Nights at the Circus* not to borrow its costumes but rather to dispense with them. Scenes are relived not to perpetuate their oppressive effects but to reform them; the return is made in the name of a departure. So it is in Marx's model that the imprisoning cycle of repetition must be exploded:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. . . . Society now seems to have fallen back behind its point of departure; it has in truth first to create for itself the revolutionary point of departure, the situation, the relations, the conditions under which alone modern revolution becomes serious.⁸⁷

The narrative of *Nights at the Circus* falls back behind its point of departure in order to gather its forces for a revolutionary projection into the future. This point

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *One-Way Street* 46.

⁸⁶ Benjamin, *One Way Street* 48-9.

⁸⁷ Marx, "Eighteenth Brumaire" 98-99.

of departure is arrived at by shedding the past and by a necessary shattering of consciousness: Walser's kaleidoscopic vision is wiped clean as a slate, Fevver's panorama fragmented. Walser awakens to a new consciousness not by a denial of the past but by being remade by the torrent of its contradictions. Hence, as Marx himself indicates, this model of history serves as a model for a revolution in identity:

The reformation of consciousness only consists in letting the world enter one's consciousness, in waking up the world from the dream about itself, in explaining its own actions to itself Then it can be shown that it does not concern a large hyphen between past and future but the completion of the idea of the past.⁸⁸

This 'completion of the idea of the past' is a function which Bloch attributes to the utopian impulse and its 'anticipatory illumination' of the future in the past. As Christopher Norris writes of Bloch's philosophy, the "'not yet' or token of unredeemed promise which he detected in every manifestation of past and present culture".⁸⁹ Carter's purpose in returning to scenes of the past is to plunder it of its subversive content as it is concealed in the archaic or outmoded.⁹⁰ Her narrative returns to the past not only to exorcise its horrors but also to appropriate its utopian anticipations of the future.

Carter's interest in the fairy tale is informed by this impulse. Her interest is not whimsical but philosophical; she finds in such narratives lessons of rebellion against 'fate' which exceed their apparent archaism. Bloch writes that whereas the legend "deriving from myth [teaches] endured destiny" the fairy tale "denotes revolt".⁹¹ Its archaism does not render it obsolescent because its capacity to invoke beginnings is always contemporary. If the fairy tale has been consigned to

⁸⁸ Marx quoted in Bloch, *Utopian Function* 51.

⁸⁹ Norris 242.

⁹⁰ Frederic Jameson has described Bloch's philosophical project as proceeding by an "expropriation of apparently alien or antagonistic cultural monuments". Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971) 119.

⁹¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 164.

the past or to the nursery, then its repressed energies will become only more potent: "The fairytale seeks to escape from the folkish legend to which it is banished and spellbound; utopia of the first 'beginning' seeks to escape from the archaic realm of mere 'primeval times'" (Bloch).⁹² Carter's interest in fairy tales is not in the disarmed charm of historical curiosities, tame and censored by literary translation. She does not seek to revive them like quaint costumed pageants but to capture their spirit of reason and cunning and enlist it for present purposes. This is a form of lucid nostalgia as described by Jameson:

If nostalgia as a political motivation is most frequently associated with fascism, there is no reason why a nostalgia conscious of itself, a lucid and remorseless dissatisfaction with the present on the grounds of some remembered plenitude, cannot furnish as adequate a revolutionary stimulus as any other. . . .⁹³

The idea of the past is completed in a dialectical sense: it is both fulfilled and overturned. Carter's narrative employs both materialism and enchantment to this end. She is engaged in reclaiming the properties of the irrational for the purposes of subversion. Bloch warned against the dangers of "surrender[ing] of the world of the imagination"⁹⁴ to the forces of reaction: Carter's fiction engages in raids on the stolen property of the imagination. As Benjamin wrote of the Surrealist project, so it would seem that Carter's aim is to "win the energies of intoxication for the revolution".⁹⁵

Carter's evocation of the subversive power of the irrational over the past and future radically calls into question the time of history. The ambivalent body, as manifested by Fevvers, is powerfully significant in this critical project. The body is the site of these interventions into the time of subjective and historical memory.

⁹² Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 150.

⁹³ Jameson is describing Benjamin's project: ". . . the example of Benjamin is there to prove it." Jameson 82.

⁹⁴ Bloch, *Heritage Of Our Times* 135.

⁹⁵ Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," *One Way Street* 237.

Moreover, it is through the body that an utopian elsewhere is invoked and anticipated.

Utopian Time of the Body

In Carter's narrative, a dispute between Gothic horror and enlightened hope, between reason and the irrational, takes place within the contested legacy of the Enlightenment. The possession of speech as an indicator of rationality, and the exclusive human possession of reason are rigorously interrogated. Moreover, Carter's animation of the unconscious forces of both individual and historical identity, and her exploration of the irrational make a powerful critique of the privileging of reason which is the legacy of the Enlightenment.

The unfulfilled ideals of the Enlightenment are as current to the late nineteenth century setting of Carter's narrative as if they were contemporary. The London in which the narrative is initially anchored is the site of a characteristically British empiricism. Ma Nelson's brothel - where "rational desires might be rationally gratified" (NC 26) - is constructed according to the principles of the Age of Reason as is Lizzie and Fevvers' feminism. Lizzie's repudiation of the existence of the soul is grounded in a secular materialism, which she expounds at the 'Godwin and Wollstonecraft Debating Society'. Fevvers' contempt for the countryside, where "the hand of Man has badly wrought" (NC 197), is a thoroughly eighteenth century sentiment, predating any Romantic identification with nature. In the late nineteenth century setting of *Nights at the Circus*, Ma Nelson's brothel is both too old fashioned *and* too modern - a conjunction which characterises utopian forms.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Indeed, the 'archaism' of the Enlightenment even precedes its own historical location. Bloch traces an anticipation of it in the fairy tale: "here and everywhere, in the courage, the sobriety, and hope [of the fairy tale], there is a piece of the Enlightenment that

The philosophy of the Enlightenment announces a new departure in human history into an era of revolution. It functions as the origin of the modern world in which both its ideals and its contradictions are still unfolding: it is still too early to account for its consequences. The modern anxiety about the status of the body, with which Carter's narrative plays, can itself be traced to the foundations of Enlightenment thought, which subjugates the body to the mind.⁹⁷ Moreover, the implicit gendering of the body within this opposition ensures that the 'matter' to be mastered is feminine while the mind which exerts its rational rule is masculine. Fevvers manifests the ambivalence inherent in the conjunction of the body and femininity, of materiality and women: as 'marvellous machine' *and* 'woman monster', she embodies both poles of the association between femininity and materiality as outlined by Butler: "inert - always already dead" and "fecund - ever-living and procreative".⁹⁸

The Enlightenment concept of reason is manifest throughout discourses of emancipation. However, its legacy is a particular ambivalence for women - it would seem to demand the repudiation of the body in order to attain masculine reason. This dilemma can be read in Mary Wollstonecraft's founding feminist text, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Her demand for women's rights is accompanied by a persistent anxiety about the status of women's bodies. Women are "slaves to their bodies,"⁹⁹ by turns "intoxicated"¹⁰⁰ by male adoration and "enervated by confinement".¹⁰¹ The aristocratic female body litters Wollstonecraft's polemic in 'trifling', 'idling' and 'languishing' attitudes. The "habitual indolence" of these supine figures infers a moral laxity determined by

emerged long before there was such a thing as the Enlightenment." Bloch, *Utopian Function of Art and Literature* 169.

⁹⁷ "The human body may be considered as a machine." Descartes quoted in Foster 131.

⁹⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993) 37.

⁹⁹ Wollstonecraft 49.

¹⁰⁰ Wollstonecraft 4.

¹⁰¹ Wollstonecraft 27.

bodily constitution. There is a punitive overtone to Wollstonecraft's endeavour to 'correct' and 'purify' women in mind *and* body. Her text expresses an originating moment in feminism, but one which is the origin also of a profound ambivalence in feminist thought. Wollstonecraft insists on equality despite difference - a 'human' rationality *in spite of* a female body. Cora Kaplan writes of the "heart-breaking conditions for women's liberation" which are set by Wollstonecraft's discourse: "a little death, the death of female pleasure".¹⁰² Margaret Whitford makes an account of the double position of women within the discourse of Enlightenment:

Western feminism in all its forms is an inheritor of the Enlightenment and its contradictions. . . . In the first place, it is clear that Enlightenment values have not been applied to women. Feminism's appeal to emancipation and autonomy, justice and equality, is an appeal for the extension of revolutionary ideals to women too. Second, and to a certain extent in contradiction of the first goal, there is a critique of those same values, focusing on the notion of the unified humanist subject.¹⁰³

The revolutionary scope of the Enlightenment legacy is one yet to be fulfilled and yet whose fulfilment would explode its own inherent contradictions. This fulfilment requires a lucid return to origins. Judith Butler suggests that the association between femininity and materiality is an 'origin' which has its own history. Such a radical encounter with origin is perhaps the function of a lucid utopian nostalgia: it returns to the past to construct a future which will transform present conditions. Whitford writes that "utopia is the space where the contradictory inheritance of the Enlightenment appears in one of its clearest forms".¹⁰⁴ Moreover, she makes a crucial distinction between two concepts of the future of utopia: one of static perfection and a utopia as process. The prediction

¹⁰² Cora Kaplan, "Wild Nights: Pleasure/Sexuality/Feminism," *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986) 39.

¹⁰³ This account is made in the context of expounding Irigaray's project: "Irigaray criticises the heritage of the Enlightenment in the name of Enlightenment values." Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991) 16.

¹⁰⁴ Whitford 18.

of an ideal future out of an unsatisfactory present has the danger of perpetuating the conditions that determined that dissatisfaction. Utopia as process demands a double vision: comprehension and engagement with the present combined with a utopian imagining, which will sustain the future as a goal and even bring it into being.

Nights at the Circus is engaged in the work of utopia as process: it engages in impossible contradictions in the anticipatory hope of an as yet provisionally imagined future. It contributes to an aspect of utopian reflection in feminist thought which is not transfixed by a fatalistic nostalgia for a lost ideal but trained upon the creation of a different future. As Whitford writes of Irigaray's project, she is "constructing in imagination a society that would be fit for women to live in".¹⁰⁵ Whitford describes this aspect of feminist imagining as: "a strand in feminist utopian reflection which argues powerfully that we *need* utopian visions, that imagining how things could be different is part of the process of transforming the present in the direction of a different future."¹⁰⁶ *Nights at the Circus* does not offer a vision of the future. Indeed, where Carter makes speculations on the future in her other fictions, it is generally dystopian or apocalyptic.¹⁰⁷ *Nights at the Circus* reveals the possibility of a utopian transformation through its revelation of profound and radical difference; this transformation is effected through the body and takes place in the ruptures of time.

The exploration of the theme of time in *Nights at the Circus* culminates in the Siberian wilderness among people who inhabit a "temporal dimension which did not take history into account" (NC 265). The narrative's escape to a place where there is no distinction between past and present is a symptom of discomfort with

¹⁰⁵ Whitford 190.

¹⁰⁶ Whitford 19.

¹⁰⁷ See Carter's *Heroes and Villains* (1969), *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and *The Passion of New Eve* (1977).

the conventional course of time. That is, with the masculine "time of history" as it is described in Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time": "time as project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: time as departure, progression and arrival".¹⁰⁸ Commenting on James Joyce's distinction between "father's time, mother's species", Kristeva writes: "when evoking the name and destiny of women, one thinks more of *space* generating and forming the human species than of *time*, becoming or history."¹⁰⁹ As an aspect of patriarchal authority, time is a father: "there is no time without the father" writes Kristeva.¹¹⁰

The authority of time is represented in *Nights at the Circus* by Ma Nelson's clock, Father Time, which depicts time in his aspect as the Grim Reaper with a skull and scythe. Masculine time is also represented by the clock which regulates the women's asylum and whose patriarchal authority the Countess assumes: "sometimes the face of the clock seemed indistinguishable from the livid face of the Countess" (NC 212). A concept of time whose inexorable linearity cannot accommodate change but can only conclude in death, is exemplified by the clowns whose morbid sacrificial pantomime is in opposition to Fevvers' utopian comedy: she denounces them as a "crime against humanity" (NC 143).

Buffo and his troop of clowns inhabit their own world of nihilism and violence: Clown Alley has the "lugubrious atmosphere of a prison or a mad-house" (NC 116). Like Ma Nelson's brothel, Madame Schreck's crypt and the Settlement at R., it is a sexually segregated society. However, its horror is entirely self-inflicted; in a private bergomask, the sublimated aggression of their public fooling is vented in mock acts of castration and anal penetration. Furthermore, Buffo's almost Beckettian description of a birth - "his reluctant meat came skulking out of her womb" (NC 121) - demonstrates a perverse alienation from the world of

108 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 192.

109 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 190.

110 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 153.

women. Their clowning constitutes an abject routine of utter alienation. Indeed, Buffo declares that "despair is the constant companion of the Clown" (NC 119). The clowns' white faces are likened to "death masks", "untenanted replicas" (NC 116) behind which their real selves may be absent. Whereas Fevvers' disguises are contingent, the clowns identify absolutely with the mask. As Buffo comments on himself: "Take away my make-up and underneath is merely not-Buffo. An absence. A vacancy!" (NC 122). In their existential anguish, the clowns empty festive motifs of any token of regeneration or redemption. Buffo wears his "insides on his outside" by sporting a wig made from a bladder which "does not simulate hair" (NC 116). However, the analogy is pressed further so that Buffo "stores his brains in the organ which, conventionally, stores piss" (NC 116), an image of a pickled brain which approaches the truth of his alcoholism. Buffo's thirst is indeed gargantuan and he expresses a desire to "bottle the whole world" and "tip it down his throat". However, his impulse to "piss it against the wall" (NC 118) substitutes violent expulsion for comic incorporation.

Christian symbolism of martyrdom and sacrifice is central to Buffo's self-description: "the clown is the very image of Christ" (NC 119). Their mimed feast emulates the composition of Leonardo Da Vinci's "Last Supper", with Buffo in the role of Christ: it suggests not an embrace of, but a farewell to, the mortal world. Christian imagery persists in Buffo's representation as the comic body which refuses to die and bursts from its coffin. However, Buffo's return from the dead has a literal quality which is far from redemptive; after a drinking spree he has the "air of a revenant back from the grave in flapping cerements stained with dung, mire and vomit" (NC 173). These subversions offer no new, utopian forms. On the contrary, they reform and consolidate what has been inverted: "nothing came of catastrophe, chaos invoked stasis" (NC 152). In his "convulsive self-dismemberment" (NC 117), Buffo himself is the "centre that does not hold" (NC 117): the mad-merriment of public performance becomes Buffo's authentic insanity. As Buffo attests, the clown is "the scapegoat upon whose stooped

shoulders is heaped the fury of the mob" (NC 119); the victim of a displaced violence, the site on which a crisis of subjectivity is appeased through sacrifice.

The clowns' performance seems to fulfil a subliminally sacrificial ritual function.¹¹¹ The audience vicariously participates both in the inversion of established forms and in the imposition of the punishment which they have evaded. Thus, the audience enjoys a temporary release from a prohibition against transgression only to have this prohibition reinforced. The tradition of the comic represented by the clowns belongs to a long-established conviction that laughter arises out of derision. Patrick O'Neill surveys the heritage of this opinion:

Plato held humour to arise from delight in the suffering of others; Aristotle felt that the humorous is to be found in some defect, deformity or ugliness in another; Cicero thought mental afflictions to be a prime source of laughter. Sixteen centuries later Hobbes, in his *Leviathan* of 1651, still defined laughter as a kind of "sudden glory" at the misfortune of another, and even in our own century Bergson's *Le Rire* of 1900 sees humour essentially as a punishment inflicted on the unsocial or at least as a castigation of stupidity.¹¹²

In keeping with this interpretation, laughter at the clowns is described as the "successful suppression of fear" (NC 151). When the audience unwittingly witness his actual disintegration, they laugh "as if not to laugh would have provoked the most savage punishment" (NC 175): that is, perhaps, the punishment they are applauding. The cruelty of the audience as 'mob' is evident in the "roar" (NC 179) it emits when, already made bloodthirsty by Buffo's sacrifice to the "coffin of [his] madness" (NC 178), it witnesses the near devouring of Mignon and the actual slaughter of the tigress: "such a sound as the Roman audience must have made when a lion ate a Christian" (NC 179). The child is the particular subject of the clowns' performance: the babies "weeping with terror" and the children "teetering between tears and laughter" (NC 118). Buffo's assertion that

111 See Sigmund Freud, "Psychopathic Characters on Stage," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume III*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961).

112 Patrick O'Neill, "The Comedy of Entropy: Towards a Definition of Black Humour," *Proceedings of the Tenth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association* (London: Garland, 1985) 173.

the "child's laughter is pure until he first laughs at a clown" (NC 119) suggests a culpability for the pervasive exploitation of children within *Nights at the Circus*. Buffo's compulsion to corrupt requires the idea of the purity of the child's imagination to constantly refresh his messianic pessimism:

. . . Buffo the Great! Who will live on as long as some child somewhere remembers him as a wonder, a marvel, a monster, a thing that, had he not been invented, should have been, to teach little children the *truth* about the filthy ways of the filthy world. As long as a child remembers. . . . (NC 122)

The clowns' nightly ritual of martyrdom, imbued with the symbolism of martyrdom and sacrifice, affirms only the *impossibility* of change in an irredeemably fallen world. In such a culture, the imagining of Eden, like that of childhood, is a necessary vision of loss in order to freeze the present into an eternal moment of original sin. Thus, having lost Buffo, the clowns enact a dance of death, a St. Vitus dance of self-extinction, which is the product of their resignation to a the fallen world: "They danced the deadly dance of the *past* perfect which fixes everything fast so it can't move again; they danced the dance of Old Adam who destroys the world because we believe he lives forever" (NC 243). In profound contrast to the utopian temporality instituted by Fevvers' ambivalent body, memory is a curse within the clowns fatalistic "deadly dance" of time. Moreover, "a wonder, a marvel, a monster" can only be a harbinger of chaos and not a portent of transformation.

Whereas masculine, linear time produces tragic narratives, the narratives of feminine, cyclic time are comic in their demonstration of the perpetual return of the regeneration of spring. Fevvers embodies this comic concept of time, whose radical energies rupture the course of "authentic history" (NC 96); its conceptions and productions confound the legitimacy of masculine time.

The egg from which legend has Fevvers emerge evokes arcane concepts of creation predating the linear time of Christianity. Moreover, it eclipses the principle of paternity and substitutes it for an excess of mothering in Ma Nelson's

brothel. This myth of self-conception, traditionally a male prerogative, finds affirmation in Fevvers' title the Cockney Venus - her own primal waters perhaps being those of the Thames. Furthermore, a folk legend of conception native to the British Isles is evoked in the Wiltshire Wonder's story of her origins: her "madcap mother", a "merry milkmaid" (NC 65), is impregnated by the 'King of the Fairies' on midsummer's night in a Wessex Fairy Mound and during the tumult of first-of-May merriment. This archaic 'green world' romance invokes a pre-Christian culture, partly absorbed by church ritual then banished by Puritan decree, which is here suddenly alive in the late Victorian era. It is a historical fragment lodged in the cultural unconscious; it celebrates the generous fecundity of the earth which exceeds laws of legitimacy.

Cyclic and regenerative, this model of time in *Nights at the Circus* is suggestively feminine and maternal in its disruptions of the linearity of history. A cyclic conception of time is intimately connected to the passage of the seasons and a calendar which celebrates the turning of the world. The mythic narrative of Proserpine and Ceres is evoked when Fevvers and Lizzie take the role of daughter and mother in a series of abductions and reunions. Rosencreutz names Fevvers as Proserpine when he abducts her into his underworld on midsummer night's eve; a "fingernail moon" (NC 74), which floats above his Gothic mansion, represents "the moon in her aspect of 'waning', going under the earth, and thence with Proserpina, the lost daughter of Ceres" (Stevie Davies).¹¹³ The Eleusian^{Λι} mysteries are also evoked by Mignon, who sings of "somewhere, elsewhere beyond the absence of flowers" (NC 249) and whose voice seems to "bring on springtime prematurely" (NC 268):

. . . all the wilderness was stirring as with new life. Came a faint shimmer of bird-song, and a whirring as of wings. Soft growls, and mews, and squeaks of paw on snow. And a distant crack or two, as if the ice in the river had broken up in ecstasy. (NC 250)

113 Stevie Davies, *The Idea of Woman in Renaissance Literature: The Feminine Reclaimed* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986) 121-2.

A "miracle of frail violets" (NC 284) in the snow heralds the discovery by Lizzie and Fevvers, the mother-daughter couple, of a woman and her newborn baby.

Kristeva writes that the repetition and eternity which characterise female subjectivity are productive of ecstatic disruptions: "cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm . . . whose regularity and unison with what is experienced as extra-subjective time, cosmic time, occasion vertiginous visions and unnameable *jouissance*."¹¹⁴ Indeed, *Nights at the Circus*, celebrates the moments which suspend the time of masculine linear history to reveal the threshold of an other time. This moment is not merely a subjective epiphany - it is historical and collective. Occupying special dates in the calendar and significant stations of the clock, these moments of transformation are registered in sensations of vertigo and ecstasy; they announce the magical potential of feminine time.

Midnight is the point at which Father Time's hands are suspended: "the shadowless hour, the hour of vision and revelation, the still hour in the centre of the storm of time" (NC 29). It is also the hour which strikes three times during the course of Fevvers' narrative, and precipitates a curious sense of suspension *and* vertigo in Walser: "As if the room had . . . been plucked out of its everyday, temporal continuum, had been held for a while above the spinning world and was now - dropped back into place" (NC 87). Midsummer's eve, the year's "green hinge" (NC 33), is not only the night of the Wiltshire Wonder's conception and Fevvers' escape from Rosencreutz, but also the occasion of Fevvers' first flight. Most of all, *Nights at the Circus* is concerned with the turning of the year and the century: a winter solstice which is the "cusp of the modern age, the hinge of the nineteenth century" (NC 265). Fevvers appears to be the supernatural omen of a millenarian threshold and her passage through Europe is accompanied by apocalyptic heralds: "rivers parted for her, wars were threatened, suns eclipsed,

114 Kristeva 191.

showers of frogs and footwear were reported in the press" (NC 11)." As the dawning of the new century approaches the narrative plunges off the edge of the known world: "the world tilted away from the sun towards night, winter and the new century" (NC 200).¹¹⁵

If Fevvers' is the presiding spirit of these interventions in the course of time and history, it is her foster mother, Lizzie, who is the medium of its magic. The irresistible implication of imagery surrounding Lizzie is that she is a witch. She has an uncanny communion with the animal world and a subversive relation to female sexuality. A "tiny, wizened gnome-like apparition" (NC 13) with her cropped and speckled hair and her moustache, Lizzie has a "brisk air of bristle, like a terrier bitch" (NC 13); she wears a coat of a "grey, disturbingly anonymous fur" (NC 51) which further blurs her separation from the bestial. She makes illicit interventions in the patriarchal control of female sexuality: her handbag is "like that of a midwife or of an abortionist" (NC 150). Moreover, she declares an ideological opposition to the institution of marriage as "prostitution to one man instead of many" (NC 21). Moreover, Lizzie's magic is related to maternity in a way which renders the mothering of daughters a subversive act. Fevvers recalls being suckled by Lizzie with the exclamation, "oh, yes! I know what you mean by 'magic'" (NC 199); an enduring aura of conspiratorial intimacy surrounds Fevvers and Lizzie. Lizzie acts as a midwife to Fevvers when she is reborn as a creature of flight - a ritual enacted by them "like sorceresses" in the "dark and privacy" (NC 33). Lizzie's magic is naturalised as an aspect of household management, like the 'magic' of phosphorus matches and rising bread.

¹¹⁵ Siberia attracted the fascination of the Surrealists as a region consigned to the 'primitive' margins by the rational cartography of the West. "The World in the Time of the Surrealists" (1929) redraws the globe according to Surrealist priorities: the Pacific and Russia occupy its centre, Britain being dwarfed by Ireland and the U.S.A by Mexico and Alaska. This map is reproduced in Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood, *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (London: Yale University Press, 1993) 84.

However, Lizzie's witchcraft is also associated with her political activism. The Godwin and Wollstonecraft Debating Society is her contemporary coven and her political discourse, whose didactic emphases have an incantatory effect, is her spell of enchantment. Indeed, at the conclusion of the novel, Walser's quest does not arrive at the source of the enigma of Fevvers but at the realisation that the real sleight of hand was the concealment of Lizzie's involvement in the class war. Lizzie employs the "logic of scale and dimension" (NC 199) to disrupt the apparent inexorability of masculine time: her greatest act of midwifery is to herald the birth of the Russian Revolution.

In contrast to the clowns' "deadly dance of the *past* perfect" (NC 243), Lizzie insists on the importance of historical analysis: "you can only define the *future* perfect by the *present imperfect*" (NC 239). Lizzie's insistence also qualifies the subversive potential of the army of lovers. They abandon Father Time in the belief that they will "need no more fathers" (NC 221) in their "primitive Utopia" (NC 218). However, their refusal of the law of the father - in its historical *and* its symbolic dimension - perpetuates by choice the silence imposed upon them in the asylum. Kristeva writes that: "an ostensibly masculine, paternal identification, because it supports symbol and time, is necessary in order to have a voice in the chapter of history and politics."¹¹⁶ Indeed, the army of lovers' silent departure into the snowbound landscape is as if into oblivion. Furthermore, Mignon's status as an archetypal victim is characterised by the "febrile gaiety of a being without a past . . . without memory or history" (NC 139-40); adrift in time, she lacks the protection from exploitation that an identity in history would lend. The army of lovers share their silence with Sleeping Beauty and the Princess. In a novel which exhibits a deep and varied strain of yearning towards speech - by such characters as Toussaint, the Professor and Samson - and which is itself

116 Kristeva, "About Chinese Women," *Kristeva Reader* 156.

sustained and propelled by Fevvers' Scheherezadic discourse, this silence could appear to be what Kristeva terms the "sulk in the face of history".¹¹⁷

Lizzie's position in time is one of negotiation. If fatherhood is a cultural innovation of fragile foundation, then Father Time may well have numerous "bastard offspring" (NC 272). Indeed, Carter seems to comply with Kristeva's solution to the conflict between taking a position within the symbolic order and sustaining a sense of the 'other' in time and identity. Kristeva proposes a dialectical position of identification with the "temporal symbolic order",¹¹⁸ in order to have a place in "symbol and time", and respect for its "'truth' situated outside time" by "listening; by recognising the unspoken in all discourse".¹¹⁹ Fevvers' ambivalent body is the site of Kristeva's 'impossible dialectic':

A constant alternation between time and its 'truth', identity and its loss, history and that which produces it: that which remains extraphenomenal, outside the sign, beyond time. An impossible dialectic of two terms, a permanent alternation: never the one without the other.¹²⁰

Representing the body at the cusp of the modern era, Fevvers embodies all those on whom materiality and unreason is projected. As the "Cockney Venus," Fevvers is an icon not only of 'New Womanhood' but also of the people; she functions as the "democratically elected divinity of the imminent century of the Common Man."^(NC 12) Fevvers traverses distinctions between high and low culture in Carter's burlesque history. Provoking "learned discussion and profane surmise" (NC 8), she mingles with the high literary culture of Collette, Toulouse Lautrec and Alfred Jarry, and with the scientific elite of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal Society. Walser is dismissive of the vulgarity of a "winged barmaid" (NC 16), who was "thrown on a common wheel of coarse clay" (NC 12), but Fevvers represents a democratic triumph which is not conditional on the embourgeoisement of 'vulgarity'. Fevvers' reference to herself as "one of the

117 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 156.

118 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 154.

119 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 156.

120 Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 156.

ruins that Cromwell knocked about a bit" (NC 273) evokes the figure of Marie Lloyd. Lloyd was famously celebrated by T.S Eliot as the "expressive figure of the lower classes" precisely because she represented for him the reality of class division and its parallel hierarchy of art forms.¹²¹ However, Fevvers represents the 'body politic' not in its subjugated position within an ordered hierarchy, but as the oppressed masses in revolt. She is associated with the "sphinx" of Russia which, in Walser's description, "squat[s]" with a "haunch" in Asia and Europe - a monstrous hybrid like Fevvers herself, "knitting . . . the blood and sinew of history in [her] sleeping womb" (NC 96).

Fevvers represents the body of the people in their materiality: that is, the massive labour power which, in revolt, becomes 'monstrous' to its masters - a phantom which returns to the social order the violence to which it has been subjected. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has written of the language of monstrosity to which Marx has recourse in his account of the economic exploitation of the labouring classes:

In the place of the self-proximity and self-possession, [capital] must provide itself with the mind of one class of human beings and the body of another. As Marx writes, quoting *Faust*, it is 'an animated monster which begins to work "as if it had love in its body"' The class of human beings whose *body* capital must appropriate is the working class 'Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks' [Marx].¹²²

The language of monstrosity evokes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*: Shelley's monster, emerging from a "workshop of filthy creation,"¹²³ is a spectre haunting Europe and wreaking revenge against injustice. Spivak considers Shelley's text alongside Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique

121 T.S Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 458.

122 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Speculations on Reading Marx: After Derrida," *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) 52.

123 Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. M.K Joseph (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 55.

of Imperialism" - the analogy is a suggestive one.¹²⁴ In Brontë's Bertha Mason, the 'primitivism' both of the woman and the colonial subject erupt from the unconscious, represented by the attic of the patriarchal and imperial seat of Thornfield. Both Shelley's and Brontë's texts are surely the progenitors of many "hideous progeny".¹²⁵ *Nights at the Circus* would seem to be an heir to this production of monsters in women's texts. Fevvers is a hybrid not only because she possesses wings but because she embodies a period of history in transition. The remaking of the human body in an era of change is painfully registered both in *Frankenstein* and in *Jane Eyre*. In *Nights at the Circus*, it would seem that it is the body which is remaking history.

Fevvers' cataclysmic laughter at the climax of the narrative signifies revolt and invokes transformation. Clément writes that "all laughter is allied with the monstrous. . . . It is the moment at which the woman crosses a dangerous line, the cultural demarcation beyond which she will find herself excluded."¹²⁶ Traces of nightmare and horror certainly linger in the shadow cast by Fevvers' monstrosity. However, she seeks to force the future into being by facing these shades.¹²⁷ If the backward glance is conventionally prohibited on pain of destruction, Fevvers assumes the place of the mythic figure who is attributed such a power: "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (Cixous).¹²⁸

124 Spivak writes of Bertha Mason that her "function in *Jane Eyre* is to render indeterminate the boundary between human and animal." Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985) 249.

125 Shelley, introduction 10.

126 Clément 33. Brontë's Bertha Mason is perhaps the most famous literary manifestation of female laughter; femininity, materiality and the irrational are conjoined in a figure whose consuming fury results in her own immolation.

127 "She laughs, and it's frightening - like Medusa's laugh - petrifying and shattering constraint. There she is, facing us." Clément 32.

128 Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981) 255.

Nights at the Circus does not end with revolution or apocalypse; the "moveable feast" (NC 294) of midnight, and the opening of the twentieth century, pass quietly and Russia remains "on the point of becoming legend" (NC 97). The utopia towards which the narrative aspires is never arrived at but is always "somewhere, elsewhere" (NC 249). What is important is the act of imagining which is part of the *process* of bringing the utopian future into being - a process initiated by Carter's "incantatory" style through which, in Rory P.B Turner's words, she is "moving and transforming her imagery to transform us".¹²⁹ The site of this imagining is represented by Fevvers' ambivalent body and by the contradictions and margins of culture and history in which she resides. The recurrent theme of the void represents not only the future but the concept of difference which necessarily must be imagined. The "compelling voids" of Fevvers' eyes reveal an "infinite plurality of worlds" just beyond an "unknown threshold" (NC 30), as she describes the "grand abyss" (NC 29) of difference into which flight plunges her. Carter's suggestion that identity should be built of "hubris, imagination and desire" (NC 97) also serves as a model for utopian imagining.

Thus, the novel ends not with revolution but with Fevvers' laughter, which is both of the present imperfect and the utopian future. In attempting to provide a physiological description of laughter, Norman Holland has described it as an "overstatement of the body"¹³⁰ - a redundant vestige of instinctual reaction. Fevvers' laughter is an 'overstatement' in the sense that it is an expression of her uncontainable body which heralds transforming explosions. As a "spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it" (NC 295), it seems to anticipate the triumph of a comic historical narrative. It is like a

129 Turner 41.

130 Norman Holland, *Laughing: A Psychology of Humour* (London: Cornell University Press, 1982) 84.

visionary anticipation of Cixous's time of "endless laughter"¹³¹ or Bakhtin's "victory of the future, of the golden age, over the past":¹³² "the grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, of the change of epochs and the renewal of culture."¹³³ It is festive laughter of a "philosophical and utopian character" (Bakhtin),¹³⁴ capable of inducing a revolutionary fearlessness: "Laughter liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor; it liberates from the fear that developed in man during thousands of years: fear of the sacred, of prohibitions, of the past, of power."¹³⁵

Moreover, the "spiralling tornado" (*NC* 295) of laughter gathers together in its progress all the manifestations of the magical breeze and 'wind of wonder' that have animated the text in one tempestuous act of enchantment. The storm which blows the clowns "off the face of the earth" (*NC* 243) is just one manifestation of the magical breeze which animates the text at moments of wonder or transformation: the "breath of stale night air" which "ripple[s]" the seats and "stroke[s]" the cherubs at the theatre as Fevvers limbers up for flight (*NC* 14); the "wind of wonder" (*NC* 15) of the audience's awe; the beating of Fevvers' wings which "ruffle" Walser's notes (*NC* 16); the "sharp gusts" of scent and powder in Fevvers' dressing-room as she slams home a point of her narrative (*NC* 25); the swish of Fevvers' eyelashes which disturbs Walser's pages; the sound of beating of wings which inspire Fevvers' first attempt at flight; the wind which sends Fevvers' hair into a "wide flaxen arc" and threatens to "whirl [her] away" (*NC* 90); the "glow" and "sizzle" of the baboushka's fire at the mention of St. Petersburg (*NC* 96); the "draught" which threatens to lift the Colonel's "flimsy, impermanent, wonderful tent . . . up and off" (*NC* 100); the "little spectral eddies

131 Cixous, "Castration of Decapitation?" 55.

132 Bakhtin 256.

133 Bakhtin 324-5.

134 Bakhtin 12.

135 Bakhtin 124.

and scurries" (NC 245) of windblown snow which herald the discovery of the Maestro's house; the "wind of wonder" of the villagers' "expelled breaths" which saves Fevvers in the shaman's god-hut (NC 290). Related to this 'wind of wonder' is the vertigo which is also a symptom of the sudden magic done to perception and perspective. Walser experiences a "vertiginous sensation" (NC 87) under the spell of Lizzie's suspension of time and in the presence of the Princess' and Mignon's music, and a "dizzying" sensation (NC 110) when looking into the Professor's eyes and is also subject to "erotic vertigo" (NC 143) in the company of Fevvers.

The novel ends, but does not close, with a "spiralling tornado" (NC 295) of laughter: the ultimate manifestation of the 'magical breeze', it leaves the narrative at the verge of the greatest threshold of all. This intoxicating and ecstatic laughter is flight as a symbol of the creative powers of the female imagination - an anticipation of the time when "all the women will have wings" (NC 285)¹³⁶. Fevvers' flight of laughter is a projection into an unknown but eagerly anticipated future. Its importance, as Clément writes, is in its taking off: "let us keep the bird's wings. Let's keep - it's the same thing - the witch's broom, her taking off, her being swept away, her taking flight."¹³⁷ Thus, the novel ends not with closure but on a threshold; it projects the reader beyond the end of the narrative and into that elsewhere of utopia which will be formed in our own imagining. Carter's "storm of time" (NC 29) irresistibly recalls Benjamin's meditations on the storm of progress as depicted in Klee's "Angelus Novus":

This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

¹³⁶ The figure of Fevvers seems to fulfil Guillaume Apollinaire's description of De Sade's Juliette which Angela Carter quotes in *The Sadeian Woman*: "'a figure of whom minds have as yet no conception, who is rising out of mankind, who will have wings and who will renew the world.'" Carter, *The Sadeian Woman* (London: Virago, 1979) 79.

¹³⁷ Clément 56-7.

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.¹³⁸

Fevvers is Carter's 'angel of history': facing the devastation of the past, she is projected into the future by the storm of her own "loud and philosophic" (Clément)¹³⁹ laughter.

138 Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations* 249.

139 Clément 23.

PART II

4. Myths of Origin: The Feral and the Feminine in Leonora Carrington's Fiction

In *Nights at the Circus*, Angela Carter's narrative returns to the threshold of modernity; that such a return is undertaken with the privilege of hindsight is evident in her highly rhetorical and self-consciously ironic style. Leonora Carrington's narratives, in contrast, are written from within the dissident modernism of Surrealism. Her writing relinquishes formal restraint to the revelations, both marvellous and catastrophic, of the unconscious. Moreover, whereas Carter stages subversions of masculine identity and history on the body, in Carrington's texts it is a crisis of female subjectivity which is manifested in strange and disconcerting bodies. Carrington's texts evoke modern myths of origin in scenes of the 'primitive' and of childhood. The discovery that these myths hold women captive in a state of origin is revealed in the recurring figures of feral females; whether *femmes sauvages* or *femmes enfant*, these figures suggest that the condition of female subjectivity is one of banishment from time and identity.

Surrealism's avant-garde project was to explode the rationality of bourgeois consciousness - both artistic and political - by releasing the subversive powers of the unconscious.¹ 'Woman' was granted a privileged place in this endeavour by

¹ In this sense, Surrealism fulfils Susan Suleiman's definition of the avant-garde as a "collective project" that links "artistic experimentation and a critique of outmoded artistic practices with an ideological critique of bourgeois thought and a desire for social change" so that artistic practice "could also be seen as a genuine intervention in the social, cultural, and political arena." *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990) 12.

the Surrealist celebration of the traditional association between the feminine and the irrational. Indeed, Whitney Chadwick remarks upon the symbolic centrality of 'woman' to the Surrealist movement: "No artistic movement since Romanticism has elevated the image of woman to as significant a role in the creative life of man as Surrealism did; no group or movement has ever defined such a revolutionary role for her."² An intercessor between the male artist and the unconscious, 'woman' was venerated in a series of transgressive figures: the *femme sauvage*, the *femme enfant* and the hysteric.³ Leonora Carrington's early fiction of 1937-41 was written during an artistic apprenticeship within Surrealism and draws upon its profane iconography.⁴ Her narratives discover a sequence of transgressive female figures in a 'state of nature'; whether outlaws in the wilderness or perverse children within the bourgeois home, these feral figures represent both a return of the repressed and a return to origin. The Surrealist fascination with an imagined 'state of nature' was not only informed by a Romantic legacy but also by a preoccupation with the 'primitive;' this preoccupation is a symptom of the modern crisis of subjectivity - a crisis to whose escalation Surrealism was committed. However, the myths of origin traced in

² Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991) 7.

³ As Briony Fer has written of the Surrealist muse, "'woman' was linked to madness, hysteria, and by extension the primitive, as closer to the irrational and as the constant 'other'." Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis," *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between The Wars*, ed. Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood (London: Yale University Press, 1993) 185.

⁴ The following is a brief outline of the biographical background to these stories. Leonora Carrington was born in 1917 to an Irish mother and an English father, a self-made Lancashire textile tycoon. Educated in convent schools, "finished" in Florence and presented to court in 1936, she chose to study art. Following the revelation of the first Surrealist exhibition in London, Carrington crowned a career of youthful rebellion by eloping to France with the 46 year-old Max Ernst. During this period, placed at the heart of the Surrealist movement, Carrington began her writing and, in 1937, held her first exhibition. The declaration of war saw Ernst interned as an enemy alien and Carrington endured a traumatic mental breakdown and incarceration in a Madrid asylum before her eventual escape in 1941, first to New York and then to Mexico City, where she continues to live.

Carrington's fiction reveal a crisis in female subjectivity. The 'state of nature' to which her feral women are banished represents the condition which women occupy in the symbolic order: excluded from the shelter of culture, language and time, 'woman' is held captive in a 'savage' state of symbolic dereliction.

Disorders of Origin: The Feral Woman

Peter Stallybrass and Allon White have written of the process of repression and return upon which the Romantic 'discovery' of nature was founded. They describe the projection of "barbaric behaviour" onto the colonies and the provinces, where it is "miraculously rediscovered" in the next century: "that alienation of 'nature' which, concealed from itself, was the precondition for its triumphant return in the prodigal celebrations of the Romantics".⁵ Such a banishment is effected upon women by the association of 'woman' with nature. Moreover, this exile has a lineage so archaic as to seem forgotten; as Catherine Clément has written, Christian myth renders women "in a primitive state; she is the incarnation of origin".⁶ Thus, by an act "concealed from itself", woman is suspended in a fallen garden of Eden. The scene is set - has always been staged - for an uncanny return. In Carrington's fiction, woman is "miraculously rediscovered" in a 'state of nature'. She inhabits the gardens and wilderness which lay siege to the bourgeois family home, and is discovered within a nursery which has fallen under the atavistic spell of the child. Whether feral foundlings or changelings, these *femmes sauvages* embody an archaic feminine principle irreconcilable with bourgeois conventions of femininity.

⁵ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986) 88-9.

⁶ Clément 28.

The natural world inhabited by Carrington's feral women is far removed from the cultivation and rule of humanity. It is as irredeemably untamed as the habitation of the medieval witch, as imagined by Jules Michelet in *Satanism and Witchcraft: A Study in Medieval Superstition*:⁷ "Where is her lurking place? In untracked wilds, in impenetrable forests of bramble, on blasted heaths, where entangled thistles suffer no foot to pass."⁸ In this unyielding and hostile environment, the feral women exercise a cruel sovereignty. Virginia Fur, in "As They Rode Along The Edge" (1937-40), speeds stealthily into the narrative in pursuit of the hunt; her glorious autonomy evokes the militant chastity of a Diana of the forest, a mythic figure associated with wooded places and metamorphosis. Attended, even drawn, by a retinue of one hundred cats, Virginia rides a wheel through the wilderness, seeking out the "worst roads" (*The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* 3) and the vertiginous thrill of the edge. Her ecstatic passage is accommodated by nature in a feline act of *noblesse oblige*: "the brambles drew back their thorns like cats retracting their claws" (*SH* 3). This uncanny tunnel through thorns resembles the "blackberry alley" of Sylvia Plath's "Blackberrying" in which a "blood sisterhood"⁹ is formed between the narrator and the brambles. Indeed, in "The Sisters" (1939), Drusille takes part in the mutual exchange of such stings in an almost orgiastic rite. Drusille is found by the narrative at the heart, even the eye, of a storm apparently summoned by her own powers and in the image of her own impulses. The disturbing ambiguity of agency in its ravishing attentions is reminiscent of Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher":¹⁰

⁷ Michelet's text was a favourite among the Surrealists and also holds a significant place in the 'cultural history' of the sorceress traced by Catherine Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975).

⁸ Jules Michelet, *Satanism and Witchcraft: The Study of Medieval Superstition*, trans. A.R. Allinson (Secaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1972) xv.

⁹ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 168.

¹⁰ Jacqueline Rose writes of "Full Fathom Five": "What Plath seems to be doing is introducing a fundamental reversibility of agency that confounds active and passive and then dramatises, through that confounding, the question of who is agent, who is victim,

It was a place of force -
 The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown
 hair¹¹

Similarly, in "The Sisters," the tempest is violent and violating and Drusille both its object and its subject: "The thunder growled around her, and the wind beat her face with its [sic] wet hair. The storm was so terrible that it tore the flowers from their stalks, and bore them in muddy streams towards an unknown fate" (*SH* 42). Drusille is placed in "the middle of all this havoc": her "harsh laugh" (*SH* 43) seems to express a mercilessly autonomous pleasure which triumphs in the symbolic violation - the 'tearing' of the flowers - of the poignant sentiments of the pastoral.

Both Drusille and Virginia Fur are ecstatic figures whose explosive effect on boundaries of identity is indicated by the swarming mass of their long black hair. They resemble Clément's sorceress: "her hair undone, not contained in a bonnet or a headdress. All her hair loose because she is nature."¹² Not only unconcealed but concealing, this hair forms a dense curtain, in "Monsieur Cyril de Guindre" (1937-40) and "White Rabbits" (1941), through which female eyes peer as if through the dense foliage of a forest. It eclipses not only the face but human identity itself, culminating in the literal effacement committed by the hyena on the maid in "The Debutante" (1937-8). Drusille's hair, in "The Sisters," moves "like black vipers" (*SH* 49), inevitably evoking the figure of the annihilating Medusa. Virginia's "mane of hair yards long" (*SH* 3) is both insinuating and grasping: its tendrils "imprison" (*SH* 7) bats and moths within its web in the progress of her flights through the forest, framing her face within a microcosmic symbol of the night sky.

who (or what) suffers and who (or what) kills?" *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991) 132.

¹¹ Plath, *Collected Poems* 193.

¹² Clément 38.

The less mature Hevalino, in "The Seventh Horse" (1941), seems more vulnerable to the piercing and scratching attentions of nature. Not so much embedded as impaled on the wilderness she is haplessly "caught" (*SH* 66) by her long hair: "[It] was so closely entwined in the brambles that she could move neither backwards nor forwards. She was cursing and hopping till the blood flowed down her body" (*SH* 66). Trapped between the two worlds of the garden and the house, Hevalino seems a hybrid creature, neither human nor animal; the women of the house declare that they "'do not like the look of it'" (*SH* 66). An "'unpleasant-looking creature half naked and caught in a bramble bush'" (*SH* 69), she is different enough from the animal realm to prompt human recognition but so different from civilised humanity as to be met with denial.

Virginia Fur, as her name alone implies, is an equally ambiguous figure: "One couldn't really be altogether sure that she was a human being. Her smell alone threw doubt on it - a mixture of spices and game, the stables, fur and grasses" (*SH* 3). This appeal to the instinctual response of smell usurps the authority of the rational mind. The inhalation of her scent is a form of invasion. Indeed, the desecration of the church by Virginia Fur and the animals is heralded by a "strong wild smell" (*SH* 13) which violates the symbolic subterfuge of incense. The dimension of smell simultaneously opens up the emptiness of appearance as a signifier of humanity - and femininity - and releases a long repressed recognition of animal origin. Clément writes, of Freud's diagnosis of the phobic neuroses of hysterics, that smell is a "disorder of origin": "The sense of smell is the first and most archaic of the human senses. It is also the first to be lost when man gets up on two feet in his move to upright posture and to culture."¹³ Virginia Fur's pungent aroma suggests that she has yet to attain an entry into culture or, even more disturbingly, that she does not recognise any such ascent.

¹³ Clément 38.

The precarious ambivalence of the border between nature and culture which Carrington's feral women occupy is demonstrated in their relation to speech. Excluded from the language of culture, they engage in the language of animals.¹⁴ Virginia is able to converse with St. Alexander in "As They Rode Along the Edge," but communicates with her cats on their own terms: "she had to put up with being insulted by the cats at times, but she insulted them back just as loudly and in the same language" (*SH* 3-4). An exchange is facilitated but one of suppressed hostility, just as Virginia's passage through the forest is attended by the latent threat of withdrawn claws. Birds function as oracles in these stories as both a compensation for, and symptom of, the protagonists' displacement from human discourse. In "Waiting" (1941), Margaret is discovered in a state of dereliction like a "person barely saved from drowning" (*SH* 61). A "familiar ghost" (*SH* 61), absorbed in an attitude of obsession, the winged creature which hovers at her lips is a manifestation of her mute "infatuated silence" (*SH* 62): "Somebody, a little earlier, had quickened his step and looked away because a winged creature was clinging to her mouth and she had not stirred" (*SH* 61). In "As They Rode Along The Edge," it is a nightingale which fulfils this function in a startlingly ambivalent image. In the substitution of song for the mute eloquence of gesture, the stolen speech of the raped and mutilated Philomel is evoked:

[Virginia] gestured to the beasts with her strange hands that the hunt was over; she opened her mouth and a blind nightingale flew in; she swallowed it and sang in the nightingale's voice: "Little Jesus is dead, and we've had a fine dinner". (*SH* 7)

The nightingale articulates a vision from its double darkness, both interior and exterior. In swallowing words in order to emit them, Virginia Fur chokes on her

¹⁴ Sarah Kofman has written that the inseparability of the possession of speech and the principle of rationality is inscribed in the history of Western philosophy: "Between these two extremes [of philosopher and animal] lie the slave, whose speech merely echoes his masters, the barbarian who 'croaks', the child who stammers and the woman whose greatest virtue is her reserve in speech, her silence." Kofman, *Freud and Fiction*, trans. Sarah Wykes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 10.

own voice and is spoken through like a medium. Moreover, in an act of mutual violence the bird is consumed and Virginia Fur is forcefully penetrated. These swift substitutions and displacements all seem to allude to a violence at the heart of speech. Furthermore, in "The Seventh Horse," Hevalino wins the services of a visionary bird with coercion: she threatens that he will be "roasted in hot fat and . . . then eaten" (SH68). This "fascinating fat bird" (SH 67) is immovably earthbound and acts as a dispassionate medium, impassive as a sun dial: "He let his shadow glide around him as the day went by and over him when there was a moon. He always sat with his hairy mouth wide open, and moths and little insects would fly in and out" (SH 67). While in possession of vision, his eyes become "bulging and sightless" (SH 68) and again his pronouncement is accompanied by an image of flight, of liberation of a withheld vision, and of swallowing: "'They are at dinner,' he said eventually, and a great black moth flew out of his mouth" (SH 68). In "The Sisters," Juniper herself is the bird counterpart to Drusille. Locked in a visionless attic, she is consigned to the consolation of a modern form of Philomel's testimonial tapestry: Drusille commands "'I've given you socks to knit. Go knit'" (SH 45). Her "raucous cries, like a peacock" (SH 45) anticipate her imminent incarnation, and on release she "crow[s]s like a cock" (SH 48), a sound which suggests the fulfilment of a prophecy.

That the bird symbol also occurs in the narratives of Carrington's perverse children allies them with the state of exile in which the feral women live. It is not a bird but a bat which invades the debutante's room, but it is an omen of the violent consummation of her plans. Also, she exchanges languages with the hyena: "I taught her French, and she, in return, taught me her language" (*The House of Fear: Notes From Down Below* 44). Furthermore, in "The Oval Lady" (1937-8), Lucretia's pet magpie is another image of mutilation and uncanny speech: "'Matilda talks like this. It's ten years since I split her tongue in two. What a beautiful creature'" (HF 40). Matilda gains speech through the loss of her own voice and her words enact the enchantment Lucretia seeks through her play-

acting: "'Horse, horse, horse', yelled Matilda, dancing hysterically on Tartar's head'" (HF 41).

It is an indication of the radical displacement of the feral women that they dwell in the company of beasts.¹⁵ In Carrington's fiction, animals are uncanny envoys from an other world: "animals are the receptacles of the forgotten" (Walter Benjamin).¹⁶ As Wolfgang Kayser writes of a sudden sense of alienation from domestic creatures: "Even in animals that are familiar to him, modern man may experience the strangeness of something totally different from himself and suggestive of abysmal ominousness."¹⁷ In the ambivalence of Carrington's animal familiars is embodied the ambivalence of the feral women, who exist between culture and nature, home and the wilderness.

Animals often function as libidinous doubles in Carrington's fantastic narratives. In "The Debutante," the savagery of the hyena's actions express impulses concealed by the eponymous heroine's composure; her appetite and fury are evocative of a repressed defiance. In "Waiting," Elizabeth's dogs, bounding and darting from the end of their leash, embody Elizabeth's liberation from inhibition: "'They lead me, my trust is implicit'" (SH 63). Furthermore, in "As They Rode Along The Edge," the wild boar which is the object of Virginia's desire is a most phallic animal: "This boar had a single eye in the middle of his forehead, surrounded by black curls. His hindquarters were covered with thick russet fur, and his back with very tough bristles" (SH 7). Virginia Fur's choice

¹⁵ The association of Carrington's women with children, cats and other wild beasts recalls the company assembled by Kofman in her analysis of the narcissistic woman: "The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-contentment and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals which seem *not* to concern themselves about us, such as cats and ^{the} large beasts of prey." Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Writing*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 51.

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992) 128.

¹⁷ Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963) 182.

of such an animal as a sexual partner recalls again Michelet's depiction of the witch's sovereignty in nature. The potent deification of female sexuality which the witch represents contrasts with the Christian split between debilitating insatiability and chaste vulnerability:

All follow her, all for her sake scorn the females of their own kind. . . .
The stallion neighs for her, breaks from all restraint, imperils her safety.
The dreaded lord of the plains, the black bull, if she passes him, bellows his
right to see her vanish in the distance. (Michelet)¹⁸

In their bestial couplings and transformations, Carrington's feral women disrupt the boundaries by which 'animal' impulses are excluded and demonised from the human body.¹⁹ The polymorphously perverse sexuality implied by these indiscriminate unions resemble Clément's account of the paradises of Hieronymous Bosch's canvases: "Nature and culture abolished, all bodies mingled: animals, fruits, and humans in the same intertwining. Flowers penetrate, fruits caress, animals open, humans are like instruments of this universal *jouissance*."²⁰ However, the pleasurable mingling and twining is also close to the grotesque torments and violations of Bosch's hells. Similarly, the erotic energy in Carrington's texts has a quality of acute ambiguity.

Carrington's feral women are the willing agents of uncanny animations which are the source of dread in Freud's and Breuer's *Studies On Hysteria*. "Emmy's bestiary" (Clément)²¹ assail and torment her with unbidden sensations:

The legs and arms of the chairs were all turned into snakes; a monster with a vulture's beak was tearing and eating at her all over her body she had been going to pick up a ball of wool, and it was a mouse and ran away . . .

¹⁸ Michelet 75.

¹⁹ Georgiana Colvile notes that "Freud identifies small animals as genital symbols (the snake being specifically phallic), wild beasts as representing passionate impulses, and beasts of prey or wild horses as substitutes for a dreaded father figure." Colvile, "Beauty And / Is The Beast: Animal Symbolology in the Work of Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini," *Surrealism and Women*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (London: MIT Press, 1991) 160.

²⁰ Clément 23.

²¹ Clément 11.

she had been on a walk, and a big toad suddenly jumped out at her. (Breuer and Freud)²²

"She entertained me", recalls Freud, "with gruesome stories about animals".²³ Emmy's compulsive retelling of her "adventures with animals"¹³² permit her to animate at her leisure a sliding series of anxieties which reveal a fixation with the 'primitive': "The children's governess had brought her an ethnological atlas and . . . some pictures in it of American Indians dressed up as animals had given her a great shock. 'Only think, if they came to life!' (She shuddered)."²⁴ The very misnaming of the 'American Indian' is suggestive of the loss of bearing of European reason when confronted with the 'other' of its own unacknowledged making. Emmy's sequence of servant, child, 'native' and animal conspire to deliver a vertiginous thrill. The sudden proximity of the 'other' and the rapid disintegration of distinction promises a shape-shifting both feared and desired. In the almost apocalyptic "thunder" (*SH* 70) of horses' hooves "beating the earth" (*SH* 10) in "As They Rode Along The Edge" and "The Seventh Horse" respectively, there is perhaps released the sexual energy encoded in Frau Emmy's sudden moment of terror: "Don't you hear the horses stamping in the circus?" (Breuer and Freud).²⁵

The horse plays a significant role in Carrington's bestiary and is accorded a particular reverence. When the horse appears as an urbane gentleman companion in "Uncle Sam Carrington" (1937-8), it recalls Jonathan Swift's Houyhnhnms in *Gulliver's Travels*, who are constructed as rational others to the depraved Yahoos. Furthermore, in "The Seventh Horse" and "The Oval Lady," the horse appears in a supernatural form derived from myth: "The Celtic Queen of Horses, the goddess who appears in the Welsh *Saga of Rhiannon* riding a pale white horse, is the

²² Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1974) 119.

²³ Breuer and Freud 107.

²⁴ Breuer and Freud 109.

²⁵ Breuer and Freud 131.

goddess of the other world, and her horse travels through the space of night as an image of death and rebirth."²⁶ Carrington revives an archaic Celtic legacy in which the horse is sacred "because it is faster than the wind and can fly through the air" (Chadwick).²⁷ The hallucinatory and libidinous potential of the horse as a creature of flight is channelled into narratives in which the horse figures as a sexual consort. In "The Seventh Horse", the ecstatic quality of Hevalino's transformation into a horse evokes both the transports of possession and an erotic union between horse and rider. In "The Oval Lady" (1937-8), Lucretia's hysterical play-acting seems to animate her rocking-horse, Tartar, and effect her own uncanny transformation. Tartar rocks "gracefully" (*HF* 40) as if in another dimension and his painted eyes "sparkle" (*HF* 41) with supernatural vision. The magical agency of snow has the curious effect of both suspending and enlivening, so that Lucretia is able to join Tartar in his "frozen" (*HF* 40) gallop in a form delineated by pure wish-fulfilment:

When she emerged, the effect was extraordinary. If I hadn't known that it was Lucretia, I would have sworn that it was a horse. She was beautiful, a blinding white all over, with four legs as fine as needles, and a mane which fell around her long face like water. (*HF* 41)

Although they are absolutely unassimilable to anthropomorphic sentiment, Carrington's beasts are nevertheless rarely 'bestial'. They embody a grace and dignity which puts to shame the human struggle to upright culture. Virginia Fur's cats exemplify the haughty dignity of the beast in Carrington's fiction: they instinctively keep a "contemptuous distance" (*SH* 4) from the self-righteous St. Alexander. The mute and unblinking presence of animals forms a sardonic witness to the often febrile relations between humans: "The two dogs were sitting near the end of the bed, they were listening" ("Waiting" *SH* 64). The "motionless" (*SH* 8) surveillance of Virginia's cats and the "prominent and relentless eyes" (*SH* 68) of Hevalino's six horses are an ironic return of the

²⁶ Chadwick 79.

²⁷ Chadwick 79.

supposedly civilising gaze of the human. The silence of these animals is less an inability to speak than an eloquent withdrawal from language. The gaze of the beast opens the prospect of an absolute otherness unmastered by human dominion; the eyes which do not 'see' human sovereignty cast its authority into doubt.

This strange encounter with the impenetrable eyes of nature in Carrington's texts has a sublime quality. Ernst Bloch's account of the monumental powers of the unconquered natural world captures the awe this encounter evokes:

The water rises so bleakly and heavily, the rock broods, is silent and stares in its nameless way, the procession of waves rolls endlessly out of the night into the night . . . the pale streak of lightening flashes . . . the stars burn as Argus eyes, which are none, as gods, which are none . . . in the midst of the vast otherness of the world-night.²⁸

Indeed, the shape-shifting of Carrington's fiction evokes a profound human yearning. It conveys a quality of nostalgia for an 'otherness' not entirely forgotten but rather 'lost'. This is the elegiac sadness of a Romantic alienation in the face of the 'objects of nature':

They *are* what we *were*; they are what we must once more *become*. We were Nature just as they are, and our culture must lead us back to Nature along the path of Reason and Freedom. They are therefore the representation of our lost childhood, that which will eternally remain dearest to us; for that reason, they fill us with a certain sadness. (Schiller)²⁹

The sadness of lost childhood pervades Carrington's texts. Despite their animal associations, Carrington's feral women *are* human and it is the fact of their humanity which gives them so much symbolic power, inhabiting as they do the boundary between human and animal, culture and nature.

²⁸ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 356.

²⁹ Quoted in Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971) 114.

The Displaced Daughter and the Family Romance

There is a suggestion that the young women and children of Carrington's writing are feral foundlings, abandoned or lost by human society and adopted by beasts. Virginia Fur and Hevalino are discovered like the long forgotten, returning like the repressed. Cixous writes of the origins of such a return: "Women return from afar, from always: from 'without,' from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond 'culture'; from their childhood."³⁰ That the village Virginia inhabits has been "long abandoned by human beings" (SH 4), suggests that she may have been the cause *or* the casualty of their flight. Though the smell of humans is "sickening" (SH 4) to her, the scent of St. Alexander's church is "vaguely familiar" (SH 6), evoking an irretrievable memory. Hevalino, with her "long wolves' teeth" (SH 68), revives the old legend of the child suckled by wolves. She inhabits "certain parts of the garden" (SH 67) just beyond the surveillance of the enjoining house, as if she had merely strayed a little too far from its confines: the "deserted figures overgrown with moss, still fountains, and old toys, decapitated and destitute" (SH 67) have the appearance of an enchanted nursery - the "ruins from our childhood" (Bloch)³¹ by which the Surrealists were spellbound. Like the eponymous heroine of Angela Carter's "Wolf-Alice", Hevalino exists in a limbo between human and animal worlds: "Nothing about her is human except that she is *not* a wolf; it is as if the fur she thought she wore had melted into her skin and become part of it, although it does not exist."³²

Like the original *enfant sauvage*, these feral children do not confirm society's self-image but return an unacceptable reflection; Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard writes of the reception given to the 'Wild Boy' of Aveyron, in Paris of 1799:

³⁰ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981) 247.

³¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 54.

³² Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (London: Penguin, 1979) 119.

The most brilliant and irrational expectations preceded the arrival of the Savage of Aveyron at Paris. A number of inquisitive people looked forward with delight to witnessing the boy's astonishment at the sights of the capital. On the other hand many people . . . believed that the education of this child would only be a question of some months, and that he would soon be able to give the most interesting information about his past life. In place of all this what do we see? A disgustingly dirty child affected with spasmodic movements and often convulsions who swayed back and forth ^{ceaselessly} like certain animals in the menagerie. . . .³³

The Wild Boy demonstrates alarmingly recidivist tendencies: the capacity for fallen humanity to sink once again into bestial oblivion. Bruno Bettelheim has written that the feral myth - that is, the belief that the natural world will nurture lost human children - "reflects the larger desire to believe in a benign nature that in some fashion looks after all of its children".³⁴ However, nature has been a far from yielding cradle to Carrington's errant daughters. Writing of Shakespeare's reference to the feral myth in *The Winter's Tale*, Bettelheim further suggests that: "Behind a belief in feral children stands the fact that some parent wishes his child to be dead, but too afraid to kill it he exposes the child to a fate just as deadly."³⁵ Indeed, there is a quality of melancholy in the exile of Carrington's feral women: a sense of radical, almost metaphysical displacement which suggests a forcible exclusion rather than an unfortunate loss. Their exile is double: that of the feral and the feminine, in which the two terms are conflated. As Carter's heroine in "The Tiger's Bride" comments, on finding a certain bond between herself, a beast, an ape and a horse: "I was a young girl, a virgin, and therefore men denied me rationality just as they denied it to all those who were not exactly like themselves, in all their unreason."³⁶

³³ Jean-Marc-Gaspard Itard, *The Wild Boy of Aveyron*, trans. George and Muriel Humphrey (New York: Meredith, 1962) 4.

³⁴ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967) 344.

³⁵ Bettelheim 343.

³⁶ Carter, *Bloody Chamber* 63.

Whereas the habitat of the feral women is a wilderness, the perverse children and young women in "Monsieur Cyril De Guindre," "The Seventh Horse," "Uncle Sam Carrington," and "The Debutante" exist in a state of internal exile *within* culture. Like the woman, the 'savage' and the neurotic, the child is associated with an 'other' world: of nature, the imagination and the unconscious. The child's position is provisional but perhaps all the more evocative for being so.

Bloch suggests that the lullaby motif of the 'theft' of a child - a version of the changeling narrative to which the feral myth also belongs - alludes to the child's otherness: "Now the child no longer 'belongs' to his parents, is among his own kind and their dream".³⁷ The changeling, like the feral foundling, evokes the strange and remote origin of the child. In "One-Way Street" (1925-6), Walter Benjamin depicts the child as a "nomad" in a "forest of dream"³⁸ - a tiny adventurer in a landscape unutterably remote to adult rationality. The child is a 'primitive' in the house, immersed in an atavistic magic which is imported into the no longer familiar bourgeois interior:

Here he is enclosed in the world of matter. . . . standing behind the doorway curtain, the child becomes himself something floating and white, a ghost. The dining table under which he is crouching turns him into the wooden idol in a temple whose four pillars are the carved legs. And behind a door he is himself a door, wears it as his heavy mask and as a shaman will bewitch all those who unsuspectingly enter.³⁹

How much more strange is the female child who carries the otherness both of infancy and of femininity. She is always the *femme enfant* and not only for the iconoclastic *avant-garde*. Orthodox patriarchal culture prematurely finds in her the potential woman, but simultaneously holds the mother captive in infantilism. The Surrealists expose this paradox when they celebrate the wilful effrontery of this child, whose 'nature' is in strife with her prescribed role.⁴⁰ As tightly bound

³⁷ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 152.

³⁸ Benjamin, *One Way Street* 73.

³⁹ Benjamin, *One Way Street* 74.

⁴⁰ "The little girls and their "ill-mannered" bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror." Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 247.

by codes of feminine decorum as by conventions of dress, the strictures surrounding the *femme enfant* serve to reinforce the necessity of her repression: "women, who are still savages, still close to childhood, need good manners - conventions that keep them under control. They have to be *taught how to live*" (Clément).⁴¹

The opening of Walter Benjamin's "A Berlin Chronicle" (1932), not only stages the bourgeois family scene for "The Debutante," but also anticipates its strange commerce between the nursery and the zoo:

Now let me call back those who introduced me to the city. For although the child, in his solitary games, grows up at closest quarters to the city, he needs and seeks guides to its wider expanses, and the first of these - for a son of wealthy middle-class parents like me - are sure to have been housemaids. With them I went to the zoo. . . .⁴²

An anticipation of the world of unreason existing behind the facade of propriety in Carrington's thoroughly bourgeois homes, is also established by textual echoes of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. The narrator of "Uncle Sam Carrington" opens the narrative as an agent of her mother's sensibilities and an upholder of propriety:

When I was eight I was considered the most serious member of my family. My mother confided in me. She told me that it was a crying shame that she wasn't invited anywhere, that Lady Cholmondey-Bottom cut her when they passed in the street. I was grief stricken. (HF 61)

However, her solemn self-sufficiency and precocious pragmatism is at odds with the passive long-suffering of her mother. The tone in which she sets out into the forest and the night has the absurd ring of that Victorian anti-heroine, Lewis Carroll's Alice: "Trees surrounded me on all sides. 'I'm in a forest,' I said, and I was right" (HF 62).

The eruption of the savagery of the feral foundling within the bourgeois home posits a different story of origin to the 'state of nature'. It posits the 'family romance' which, as Freud's 'myth of origin', is the foundation of sexual identity.

⁴¹ Clément 29.

⁴² Benjamin, *One Way Street* 293.

The figure of the daughter exemplifies the symbolic destitution to which women are subject within the symbolic order; the daughter is destined for alienation from the mother and identification with the father. To take her place in culture, the daughter must submit to a condition of female strife and alienation. Women are forced to become rivals for the only position granted to them, that of the mother - a role sanctioned exclusively by paternity. As Irigaray writes, the daughter is dispossessed of identity:

The Oedipus complex states the law of the non-return of the daughter to the mother, except in the *doing like* of motherhood. It cuts her off from her beginnings, her conception, her genesis, her birth, her childhood. . . . Divided in two by the Oedipus complex (and henceforth situated between two men, father and lover?), exiled in the masculine, paternal world. Wandering, a suppliant in relation to values she could not appropriate for herself.⁴³

The uncanny discovery in Carrington's texts of displaced and indigent female figures, apparently without origin, is highly suggestive of the stateless passage of the daughter before she is "transplanted into the genealogy of her husband" (Irigaray).⁴⁴ Carrington recounts Freud's 'family romance' - which is already furnished with fantasies of abduction at birth and dispossessed fortune - from the perspective of the daughter.⁴⁵ From her outlaw position, the daughter is well placed to stage assaults on the conventions of bourgeois femininity. However, in Carrington's fiction, her radical naiveté exposes the violence of the family romance by obeying its logic. Moreover, the poignancy of this wandering suppliant exceeds her role as a vehicle of iconoclasm; the youth, vulnerability and nihilism of Carrington's feral charges seems to speak of a melancholy arising

⁴³ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 105.

⁴⁴ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 199.

⁴⁵ See Freud, "Family Romances," *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Volume IX*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1961). Clément has written of the way in which Freud's narrative of origin eclipsed rather than uncovered a certain knowledge: "Throughout the period in which he was listening to hysteria, Freud was like a prisoner of the mythology of origins. Pursuing a real cause, he sought to discover a true story." Clément 47.

from mourning. The daughter represents an exclusion of the feminine which is not a rhetorical choice but a profoundly metaphysical condition.

Panthilde, in "Monsieur Cyril De Guindre," is 'discovered' in a garden in which the duration of her presence is disturbingly indeterminate: she seems to have emerged, fully formed, from nature. The unwanted child of a disastrous marriage, she makes an unwelcome appearance in her father's home: Thibaut, the companion of her father, Cyril, demands of him "how it has come about that your garden is infested with nymphs?" (*SH* 35). The fourteen year-old Panthilde's recalcitrant presence exerts a powerful sense of unease. In strong contrast to the fantastic nature of Thibaut's and Cyril's outfits, Panthilde appears encased in a convent uniform:

Her dress was made of a stiff black material and had a little white collar at the throat. Her skinny legs were covered in thick black wool. A straw hat hid her face. Her long black hair was braided into correct plaits: an inch or two more and they would have reached the ground. (*SH* 38)

As a convent school girl, Panthilde is a potent vehicle of the Catholic iconoclasm of the avant garde. Carrington's protagonist is a version of the "young girl, dressed in white as though for her first communion, reading pornographic poems" who took the stage at a Dadaist exhibition in 1920 in Cologne (Helena Lewis).⁴⁶ Panthilde appears malevolently invulnerable; the "perverse beauty" (*SH* 38) which lurks beneath the brim of her hat suggests a capacity for wickedness which is at least equal to the layers of prohibition which surround her. Cyril is "astonished" (*SH* 38) and his almost incestuous encounter with Panthilde is mediated through a hallucinogenic haze in which reality and fantasy are impossibly blurred. The shell of her clothes is displaced to her lips as the substance into which she dips them leaves them "black and gleaming like the back of a beetle" (*SH* 38): Cyril "tremble[s]" with "horror and desire" (*SH* 38) at his thwarted compulsion to taste her lips.

⁴⁶ Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) 10.

Like Panthilde, Lucretia in "The Oval Lady," seems possessed of an oblique and perverse sexuality. Lucretia's energies are trapped within the patriarchal home and channelled through the Oedipal family romance. The privileged and spoiled daughter of her father, Lucretia's hysterical protests against him are resonant with Oedipal tensions. Suspended in childish egoism, she stages the spectacle of her rage in her nursery where her behaviour veers between hysteria and an infantile tantrum. If Panthilde's sexuality seems precociously perverse, Lucretia's is regressively so. Her feelings are invested in the rocking-horse of her childhood who figures as a kind of rival for her father's love. As Panthilde brings the wilderness of the garden into the home, so Lucretia opens her nursery windows to the elemental magic of snow. Lucretia induces in herself a state of convulsive delirium by the fury of her play: "She laughed with joy and danced madly around in the snow" (*HF* 41). Similarly, Virginia and Igame's lovemaking in "As They Rode Along The Edge" is preceded by a "dance of ecstasy" (*SH* 9) and just as the sublimated violence of their union is empathetically enacted by the cats - "[they] caterwauled and stuck their claws into one another's necks" (*SH* 9) - so Lucretia's magpie beats out the reckless impulses of her ritual: "Matilda cawed and struck her head against the walls" (*HF* 41). Although Lucretia's father's reprimands are offered in tender tones - "'I'm afraid, my dear Lucretia, that this time I shall have to punish you pretty severely'" (*HF* 42) - his commands are brutal. The governess acts as his agent in physically bridling his daughter but he himself burns Tartar, the rocking-horse: "the most frightful neighing sounded from above, as if an animal were suffering extreme torture" (*HF* 43). It would seem that Tartar is the projection of Lucretia's ambivalent feelings towards her father, a substitute object for her love and an agent of her hostility: "'Tartar is my favourite. . . . He loathes my father'" (*HF* 40). Furthermore, the energy and imagination invested in Lucretia's hysterical mutiny against her father betrays a narcissistic attachment. The threat to starve herself to

death clearly expresses a willing dependency: "I don't drink, I don't eat. It's a protest against my father, the bastard" (HF 38).

"The Seventh Horse" is a different rendition of the Oedipal family romance depicted in "The Oval Lady," in which the daughter's attachment to the father is translated into an economy of fantasy centring on the horse.⁴⁷ The formal parallels of the narratives are endorsed by the recurrence of the number seven, whose repetition is granted some arcane magical power. In "The Oval Lady," the narrator passes the house seven times before entering and Lucretia's father warns her that the seventh punishment is the last. In "The Seventh Horse," Hevalino mumbles "seventy-seven, seventy-seven" (SH 67), Philip declares that he is eating alone for "the seventh time in seven days" (SH 70) and Hevalino is turned into the seventh horse of the title. In "The Seventh Horse," Philip is not an omnipotent figure like Lucretia's father, who is austere to the point of angularity: "an old gentleman, looking more like a geometric figure than anything else" (HF 42). Moreover, Philip is free of the uncanny costumes, feminine imposture and narcissistic solipsism which attends most of Carrington's other male characters: he is humane and compassionate, his 'natural' masculinity coinciding with a rare humanity. Philip is cast as the "friend of the horses" (SH 70) and Hevalino's transformation into a horse enables an erotic union between the two which is an appeasement of their common sense of exile:

He counted seven horses as they galloped by. He caught the seventh by the mane, and leapt onto her back. The mare galloped as if her heart would burst. And all the time Philip was in a great ecstasy of love; he felt he had grown onto the back of this beautiful black mare, and that they were one creature. (SH 71)

A series of associations and formal echoes of "The Oval Lady," conspire to suggest that Hevalino is, at least symbolically, Philip's daughter. Hevalino, the

⁴⁷ The symbolic substitution of the horse for the father in these narratives upholds Freud's belief that "the totem may be the *first* form of father-surrogate." Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement Between the Mental Lives Of Savages and Neurotics*, trans. James Strachey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950) 148.

foundling child, is painfully caught between Mildred and Philip's barren home and her own exile - drawn to the former but apparently belonging to the latter. Hevalino's union with Philip seems to transform her once more. She is returned to the unfinished infantile form in which she has effectively been suspended by her abandonment. Yet, she simultaneously becomes her own offspring: "nobody could explain the presence of a small misshapen foal that had found its way into the seventh empty stall" (*SH* 71). Displacing the phantom baby of Mildred - who has been not so mysteriously trampled to death - Hevalino is poignantly reborn into her father's affections.⁴⁸

In both "As They Rode Along The Edge" and "The Seventh Horse," the wilderness that Virginia Fur and Hevalino inhabit is set against two households headed by men, St. Alexander's Church and Philip's home. However, it is the women who enforce their exile: both the Talkative Lady and Mildred represent a morbid, hysterical femininity which is cynically employed for the purposes of manipulation.

Whereas Virginia Fur is "all open skin, natural, animal, odorous, and deliciously dirty" (Clément)⁴⁹ the Talkative Lady - who buys up Igame's corpse to be eaten at the convent - has a "pinched, dry" (*SH* 10) and "shrivelled" (*SH* 11) face and a "flat chest" (*SH* 11) in which, according to Engadine, "there isn't room for a heart, her bust's too tight" (*SH* 11). Similarly, Mildred is "thin and dry as a stick" (*SH* 66). Both women's tightly closed bodies recoil from the potency of nature. To Mildred, Hevalino is "something unpleasant in the garden" (*SH* 69), as if thrown up by nature's monstrous profusion, and the Talkative Lady is menaced by the virile energies of the wilderness: the "devil's look" and "brutish smell" of a billygoat and the "rude animal shapes" (*SH* 11) of the mountains.

⁴⁸ The incestuous subtext to these narratives might remind us of Freud's notorious substitution of a seduction fantasy for an actual event of sexual abuse in his analysis of hysteria.

⁴⁹ Clément 39.

The behaviour of both veers manipulatively between coquettish flirtation and morbid speculation. Their partners are infantilised as "such a child, my husband" (*SH* 10) and "my darling little husband" (*SH* 70); in her coy posturing the Talkative Lady casts herself as "nothing but a capricious girl" (*SH* 11) and Mildred promises not to be "naughty" (*SH* 70) again. Their sexual relationships have only the pseudo-incestuous models of overbearing motherhood or the precocious possessiveness of the father-fixated daughter. Furthermore, they flaunt their supposed fragility as a weapon of manipulation. Mildred positions herself as teetering on the brink of mortality - "I myself eat very little, you know, I am too ill. I am very near to death, very near" (*SH* 11) - while Mildred defers to a phantom malady, the uniquely feminine "delicate condition" (*SH* 69) of pregnancy.

Both the Talkative Lady and Mildred are mother figures only in the sense that their loyalty, as wives, to the patriarchal order renders them treacherous to the young women, the errant daughters, who seek to live beyond patriarchal law. Mildred and the Talkative Lady endure fraught relations of barely concealed hostility with their female companions. Not wives in their own right, Myrtle and Engadine enjoy vicariously the privileges of marriage but bitterness and envy attend their dependence. Engadine wears the "icy look of a dutiful lady" (*SH* 10) while Myrtle is set "trembling with delicious expectation" (*SH* 70) at the prospect of a dispute between Mildred and her husband.

The lesson of these narratives of substitute mothers is that the Oedipal romance which they depict sets the daughter in lifelong competition with other women. Denied a symbolic home of their own, women are offered only a vicarious position in society through an identification with men. In the absence of the mother, a series of women occupy the role of housekeeper to patriarchal authority in Carrington's narratives. The female occupants of these houses of women are depicted as caught in tortuous rivalries, while men are curiously removed from positions of accountability. The seething tensions they harbour fulfil Irigaray's

description of the cost on female relations of the poverty of symbolic representation:

the unspoken, the implicit, the flare up of passions, persecution through silent consumption, demands or claims always expressed elsewhere or to others, the seizure of power by some women and reduction of all women to 'like everyone' or 'like me'.⁵⁰

Companionship between women in Carrington's early fiction is rarely depicted⁵¹: her female characters exist in a state either of solitude or of suspended mutual hostility and competition, forever repudiating the mother in the figure of other women. In both "The Sisters" and "The Debutante," the maid is a convenient scapegoat by virtue of her class. Engadine, having already suffered a kicking from Drusille, is expediently dispatched from the narrative by Juniper's appetite. Moreover, in the eminently bourgeois household of "The Debutante," the maid is both the agent of the mother, as keeper of the house, and her substitute. It is the maid who fulfils the practical functions of the mother, despite being written out of Freud's abstracted family romance.⁵² Furthermore, as Stallybrass and White point out, the maid is the mediating figure who belongs "both to the bourgeois family and to the 'nether world'".⁵³ As such she is the missing link whose arbitrary dispatch also fulfils the function of covering the debutante's tracks.

Moreover, a number of stories set two female characters as doubles in which the triumph of one is achieved almost inevitably at the expense of the other. "A Royal Summons" leaves the narrator about to kill the queen out of fear for her own safety, while "Pigeon, Fly!" sees the narrator inherit the role of the other woman. "Waiting" opens with the ominous tableau of two women in strife: "Two

⁵⁰ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 193.

⁵¹ In Carrington's 1974 novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (London: Virago, 1991), she depicts a conspiratorial camaraderie between her two spirited elderly heroines.

⁵² See Jim Swan, "Mater and Nannie: Freud's Two Mothers and the Discovery of the Oedipus Complex," *American Imago* 31:1 (1974) 1-64.

⁵³ Stallybrass and White, 150.

old women were fighting in the street, pinching each other like a pair of angry black lobsters" (*SH* 61). They are caught in a timeless and primal hostility: "Nobody knew how the quarrel had begun" (*SH* 61). The narrative proceeds to reveal two characters whose fates mimic each other; the abandoned Margaret is frozen in grief, consumed by nostalgia and loss while the strident Elizabeth flourishes. Sonia Assa's description of the relationship depicted in "The Sisters" seems equally to apply to "Waiting": "one sister wanes, the other waxes" (*SH* 219). The depletion of the less fortunate 'sister' is rendered literal in "The Sisters" for while Drusille rages with the storm awaiting her lover, Juniper is confined to the attic, a spectral hybrid: "Perched on a rod near the ceiling, an extraordinary creature looked at the light with blinded eyes. Her body was white and naked A mass of white hair fell around her face, whose flesh was like marble" (*SH* 44).

The narrative of the "The Debutante" exemplifies the doubling and displacement of female roles. Mary the maid suffers the brutal consequences of the debutante's mutiny against her mother, the hyena enacts this rebellion on the debutante's behalf and the hyena herself conceals her consuming features behind the mask of the maid's face. In a sense, these displacements betray the fundamental interchangeability of female roles. The narrative takes place entirely within a society of women - the mother, daughter and maid - which conceals the patriarchal structure. The debutante's ball, a marriage market for the exchange of women, appears as a feminine event but the father is a determining absent presence.

The eponymous heroine of "The Debutante" pursues her own interests with all the confidence in the primacy of her needs that her class privilege grants her: "I certainly wouldn't have done it if I didn't hate having to go to a ball so much" (*HF* 47). Where Panthilde brings the wildness of the garden and Lucretia the fury of the elements into the house, the debutante brings the zoo. Moreover, the creature she adopts as a companion is the hyena, popularly known as a scavenging

predatory animal of mirthless laughter, whose aspirations to human society in the story are sabotaged by her smell.⁵⁴ The audacity of the hyena's imposture is little obstacle to the debutante's plans; the scale of the deceit harbours her aggression towards her mother and her society. Her imperturbable quality again recalls Lewis Carroll's Alice and indeed Georgiana Colville has commented on a striking textual echo: "[The hyena] seems to come straight out of Lewis Carroll's *Through The Looking Glass*: 'Nurse! Do let's pretend that I'm a hungry hyena and that you're a bone!'. "⁵⁵

The debutante echoes another literary child in a state of mutiny, indeed perhaps the first to demand its rights: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. When the debutante curls up in an open window with *Gullivers Travels* after the hyena is dispatched, the scene echoes that of the young Jane sitting in a window-seat at Gateshead: the book in her hands and her perspective onto the world outside bespeaking Jane's as yet unarticulated desire for new horizons. Indeed, Jane names *Gullivers Travels* as a favourite volume. Furthermore, just as the hyena enacts the debutante's 'animal' instincts so Bertha Mason is characterised in bestial terms in *Jane Eyre*: she represents the "'bad animal'" (Brontë)⁵⁶ which Mrs Rivers incarcerates in the red room. Jane's upbringing is afflicted by society's fear of feeding girls' hunger for rage or appetite for love. To some extent Jane internalises Brocklehurst's maxim to Miss Temple: "you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls" (Brontë).⁵⁷ Bertha is a phantom of the

⁵⁴ The hyena features as an alter ego in Carrington's self-portrait, "The Inn of the Dawn Horse" (1938). Carrington is seated in riding habit on a chair whose sprouting hands and feet suggest metamorphosis. On the wall behind her is a suspended white rocking-horse whose frozen gallop is doubled by a fleeting white horse captured in the window. Standing at Carrington's feet - one paw raised as if to meet Carrington's archly outstretched hand - a hyena in slightly equine form meets our gaze, its body sinewy and bristling, its udders prominent and full.

⁵⁵ Colville, 164.

⁵⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Everyman, 1980) 3.

⁵⁷ Brontë 57.

indulgence of a 'vile body' in Brontë's text; she rears into the narrative in a guise emulated by Carrington's feral women:

What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal; but it was covered with clothing; and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its face and head. (Brontë)⁵⁸

Her clothing barely conceals her bestiality or, rather, her femininity is barely civilised by the signifiers of humanity. Again, Carrington's text curiously parallels Brontë's in Jane's description of Bertha: "the clothed hyena rose up, and stood tall on its hind feet."⁵⁹

A hidden genealogy could be traced for this textual echo. In Carrington's debutante and Brontë's 'clothed hyena', there is a compelling trace of that revolutionary "hyena in petticoats", Mary Wollstonecraft.⁶⁰ The mother of Enlightenment feminism, the mother also of a literary mother of a 'monster', Mary Shelley, Wollstonecraft is the author of strange progeny - a genealogy to which Carrington's texts might belong.

Primitive States: The Return to Origin

The modernist fascination with the 'primitive' often reveals a profoundly reactionary politics. The discourse of 'primitivism' has served to license the plunder and appropriation of 'other' cultures and to enforce the project of colonial subjection.⁶¹ However, it is to the credit of the political acuity of the Surrealists -

⁵⁸ Brontë 292.

⁵⁹ Brontë 292.

⁶⁰ Horace Walpole quoted in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth Century Imagination* (London: Yale University Press, 1979) 31.

⁶¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests that Bertha Mason's 'primitivism' reveals a colonial discourse at work in Brontë's nineteenth-century text: as the colonial 'other' who enables Jane to achieve individual identity, Bertha falls victim to the "general

who were vigilant anti-colonial activists⁶² - that they find the 'primitive' in its most subversive habitat: at home. The significance of the 'primitive' in Carrington's texts seems to be informed by its place within Surrealism's radical inquiry into origins. The Surrealists conspired to employ the modernist preoccupation with the 'primitive' to exacerbate the crisis of subjectivity of which it was a symptom. The 'state of nature' is a site where their fascination with the subversive powers of the irrational and their commitment to an emancipatory politics engage in a fantastic encounter.

Writing about Surrealism in 1948, Georges Bataille asserted that a concern with the 'primitive' was its defining characteristic: "It seems very clear and very distinct to me that the quest for primitive culture represents the principal, most decisive and vital, aspect of the meaning of surrealism, if not its precise definition."⁶³ As a leading member of the dissident Surrealist group centred on the ethnology of Marcel Mauss, Bataille has a particular interest in his retrospective definition. However, his emphasis is not entirely idiosyncratic. This fascination with the 'primitive' marks a continuity between Surrealism and the movement first to initiate a revolutionary inquiry into the 'state of nature': Romanticism.⁶⁴ As a modernist avant-garde movement, Surrealism aspires to rupture tradition. However, its radicalism also takes the form of recuperating a seemingly redundant aesthetic: it seeks to fulfil 'outdated' revolutionary goals.

epistemic violence of imperialism." Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1985) 251.

⁶² See Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990).

⁶³ Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994) 71.

⁶⁴ David Batchelor places Surrealism in a line of inheritance to Romanticism: "Breton projects a series of images of the human imagination as a caged animal pacing back and forth behind the bars of contemporary rationalism. These images are derived from the philosophical and cultural tradition of Romanticism. . . ." Batchelor, "'This Liberty and This Order': Art in France After the First World War," *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism* 50.

Frederic Jameson has suggested that the ideal of freedom articulated in Romantic philosophy finds its true champion in this 'new Romanticism':

It is . . . not false to say that a *certain* Romanticism comes to fulfil Schiller's system, to reinvent prophetically his vision of freedom both in the spirit and the letter, in poetry and politics alike: "at this hour", says the spokesman for such a new Romanticism, "when the authorities in France are making grotesque preparations to celebrate the centenary of Romanticism, we hereby declare that this Romanticism - for whose historical tailend we are willing to pass, but then in that case such a *prehensile tail!* - consists utterly and essentially in this year 1930 in the negation of those authorities and those celebrations; that for it, a hundred years is but as its youth; that *what* has wrongly been called its heroic period can in all honesty pass for nothing more than the puling of a being only just now beginning to make its desire felt through us. . . !" ⁶⁵

The bombastic tone of this audacious claim instantly identifies this 'spokesman' as Breton, writing in his *Manifesto of Surrealism*. Surrealism offers a way of reading the past in the service of comprehension and disruption of the present; its attitude to the past combines strategic reverence and acutely aimed iconoclasm. By claiming Romanticism as its own origin, Surrealism seeks to liberate it from the appropriation of a reactionary cultural heritage; it explodes one line of continuity in order to construct a revolutionary lineage. Frederic Jameson's own interpretation of Surrealism seems to be inspired by a similar sense of the topicality of the outdated. "Is this to say", asks Jameson of his own revival of an apparently redundant avant garde, "that Surrealism, as a theory and a practice, retains for us the burning actuality which it had in its own day? The answer is contained in the question: for the theory remains actual while the practice has ceased to be so." ⁶⁶

The question of origins is a persistent motif in Surrealism and a symptom of its own condition. In his important study of Surrealism, *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster seeks to rescue Surrealism from a historical condescension and to establish

⁶⁵ Jameson 95.

⁶⁶ Jameson 103.

its importance as "a site of an agonistic modernism within official modernism".⁶⁷ Perhaps fulfilling its own concept of automatism as a means of unconscious revelation, Surrealism can be read as a place where a problematic about history and the unconscious announces itself - one which, in Foster's words, "exceeds its self-understanding".⁶⁸ Foster asserts that surrealism is: "the nodal point of the three fundamental discourses of modernity - psychoanalysis, cultural Marxism, and ethnology - all of which inform surrealism as it in turn develops them."⁶⁹ Founding figures in each field emerged from its milieu, where "the great elaborations of these discourses are initiated":⁷⁰ Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch's Marxian notions of uneven development and the 'radical sociology' of Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois and Michel Leiris.⁷¹ Traces of a Romantic interest in the 'state of nature' could be detected in Surrealism's investigations into the origins both of society and of identity. Moreover, the Surrealists attribute an immensely subversive potential to these repressed origins: an assumption such that a 'return' might herald a revolution.

Writing as a contemporary of the Surrealists and in the face of historical catastrophe in the 1930's, Ernst Bloch asserts an urgent conviction in the utopian energies latent in the archaic and the irrational: it indicates "something unbecome in man which has not yet emerged even in the greatest 'revelations' of historical art and religion":⁷² "Hence the emergence of this 'primitiveness' in all times of genuine revolution and in fact in the deceitful times, mixed times of fascist 'revolution'."⁷³ The figure of the 'unbecome' signifies for Bloch not a regressive

⁶⁷ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993) xiv.

⁶⁸ Foster xvii.

⁶⁹ Foster xiv.

⁷⁰ Foster xiv.

⁷¹ For Lacan's debt to Surrealism, see David Macey, "Baltimore in the Early Morning," *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1988).

⁷² Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 316.

⁷³ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 316.

arrest of human progress, but an unfulfilled potential residing in the unresolved past. Writing decades later, but seemingly in a similar spirit, Louis Althusser found in the 17th and 18th century hypotheses on the origins of society - the sometimes obscure and fanciful texts which found the tentative beginnings of the Enlightenment - a radical historical imperative also based in origins:

The various characteristics of the state of nature serve alternately to account for man's reasons for evolving out of it, and to hint at the features of the society of the future and the ideal of human relations in general. Paradoxically it is this state, bereft of any type of social relationship whatsoever, which contains within itself and figures forth in advance the ideal of a society yet to be achieved. The end of history is inscribed in its very origins.⁷⁴

To invoke the 'primitive' - a condition which is anyway hypothetical - is not necessarily to instate a nostalgia which renounces history: with subversive intent, it may institute an inquiry which questions it. Writing of this seemingly paradoxical strategy, Jameson identifies the hermeneutic function of the 'primitive':

We measure, indeed for the first time we *understand* - in the strongest sense of the term - the quality of experience in our own culture and in our own moment of history by weighing it against this hypothetical reconstruction of a more primitive, a more natural and *original* past. The image of that past therefore serves, we may say, not so much a *historical* function (for such cultures have never existed), as rather a *hermeneutic* one.⁷⁵

Carrington's narratives of feral women return to an aspect of the 'primitive' which both troubles and enlivens Surrealism: the equation of woman and origin. The conventional association between woman and nature places her in a state of suspended development; between nature and culture, she never fully accedes to human identity. This time-honoured association is seemingly compounded by Freud's analogy between psychic and evolutionary development, which Kofman compares to the hierarchy upon which the history of philosophy founds its

⁷⁴ Quoted in Jameson 87.

⁷⁵ Jameson 84.

distinctions of rationality. Between the two extremes of the free man and the animal, lie the slave, the barbarian, the child and the woman: "If, within this hierarchy, there are some beings whose inferiority is indelible and essential, such as the woman, there are also, conversely, beings whose inferiority is merely provisional. The male child is a potential man. . ." (Kofman) .⁷⁶ Freud's evolutionary parallels gather together, at different stations of his inquiry, a disparate band of children, neurotics, 'savages' and women in a state of 'primitive' development. However, of these categories, it is 'woman' who remains within the metaphoric barbarism of "symbolic homelessness" (Irigaray).⁷⁷ In this condition of dereliction, she is forever outside of law, language and symbolic representation. As Irigaray writes, "according to Freud, this becoming woman is never finished."⁷⁸ By comparing the psychoanalytic method with archaeology, Freud forges an analogy between the unconscious and the archaic: "we liked to compare it with the technique of excavating a buried city."⁷⁹ The 'buried city' is a metaphor for the origins of identity which can be traced as if reconstructing a lost history. The succeeding civilisation of identity renounces the delusions of its 'infancy' but is nevertheless deeply indebted to its unacknowledged inheritance. As Jameson writes of Freud's model of the past:

Freud's topology is the most striking model of time oriented around the past, a picture of an apparent movement toward the future whose vital incentives lie buried in early childhood; for such a model comprehension consists in a working back to origins.⁸⁰

However, in the case of female identity, this process discovers a 'dark continent' - one which is indelibly archaic and cannot, or perhaps must not, be brought to light. Sarah Kofman suggests that a prohibition accompanies Freud's endeavour and ensures that the feminine will remain in oblivion. She writes that

⁷⁶ Kofman, *Freud and Fiction* 10.

⁷⁷ Irigaray 156.,

⁷⁸ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 106.

⁷⁹ Breuer and Freud 206.

⁸⁰ Jameson 128-9.

in Freud's reading of Jensen's "Gradiva", Pompeii functions as the "undecideable town *par excellence*",⁸¹ an ambivalence assured by its association with the figure of a buried woman: "both ancient and modern, scorched by light and sun but also enveloped by grey fumes and submerged in ash and lava. . . . A town with a double language, that of the living. . . and that of the dead" (Kofman).⁸² When Breton opened his first Surrealist gallery in 1937, it was named in honour of Gradiva. In a gesture with characteristically ambivalent effects, the names of various 'muses', including artists Dora Maar and Alice Paalen, child poet Gisèle Prassinos and murderer Violette Nozières, were amended to its initials. These women are simultaneously revered *and* secured all the more firmly in a frozen gallery of icons.

The male Surrealist fascination with the banishment of women to the unconscious by the symbolic order inadvertently attests to the desperate effect this expulsion has on female identity. Carrington's transgressive heroines resemble some of the female figures perversely celebrated by the Surrealists: the *femme enfant*, the *femme sauvage* and the hysteric. However, Carrington's evokes the anguish, both physical and psychological, of alienation. This anguish seems to comprehend the real pain and suffering which uneasily underlies the recklessness of the anti-heroines commemorated by the Surrealists: Germaine Berton, a young anarchist who assassinated a right wing leader in 1922; Violette Nozières, condemned to death in 1933 for the poisoning of her parents in a case with overtones of sexual abuse;⁸³ the Papin sisters, domestic servants who murdered then mutilated their employers, before carefully washing themselves and retiring to bed; the asylum inmates featured in the Salpêtrière archives, whose portraits the Surrealists published to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of hysteria.

⁸¹ Kofman, *Freud and Fiction* 102.

⁸² Kofman, *Freud and Fiction* 102.

⁸³ Nozières claimed of her father that he "sometimes forgets that I am his daughter."
Quoted in Macey 68.

Carrington's savage protagonists' mysterious genealogy suggests a wild fostering. They are never far from the uncanny place of childhood to which the narratives return with a plangent tone of melancholy. Adorno has written that Surrealism's "affinity with psychoanalysis lies not in a symbolism of the unconscious but in the attempt to uncover childhood experience by means of explosions."⁸⁴ Certainly, Carrington's insurgence into the past has incendiary effects, but it is not committed from the safety of a afar; nor is a substitute sent in advance to carry the burden of 'otherness.' The female Surrealist does not have available to her the feminine 'other' who serves the imagination of the male Surrealist. "Existence is elsewhere", declares Breton at the conclusion of his *Manifesto of Surrealism*.⁸⁵ The radically other 'elsewhere' from which Carrington's feral figures emerge manifests a profound difference excluded by, but subversive of, the phallogentric symbolic order; as such, it might be posited as the elusive utopia of a female imaginary. However, this elsewhere is qualified by an ambivalence which affects all attempts to imagine, much less, construct an alternative 'feminine' space. Just as woman is held captive by the origin she is assumed to embody, so this space is determined by the symbolic order it seeks to evade. Whether feral foundlings or children of the family, Carrington's female figures are daughters who represent a state of dispossession: "The family apparatus . . . does not include daughters. Since she is without family, she lives nowhere, in the places that signify 'nowhere'" (Clément).⁸⁶ The daughter's home is one which she will never inherit but one within which she will remain imprisoned. She remains within it on sufferance, truly "something foreign in the house" (Clément);⁸⁷ the daughter's elsewhere is nowhere - her utopia is no place.

⁸⁴ Theodor Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," *Notes to Literature: Volume One* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 88.

⁸⁵ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1972) 47.

⁸⁶ Clément 54.

⁸⁷ Clément 12.

5. "I Do Not See the Woman Hidden in the Forest": Spectacle and Sacrifice in Leonora Carrington's Fiction

Leonora Carrington's feral women represent female identity in a state of 'savage' dereliction. However, Carrington's texts also suggest a savagery at work within the symbolic order. Whereas the narratives of feral women depict transgressive protagonists, another sequence of narratives are the testimonies of a female narrator; these texts reveal the construction of woman as spectacle and of femininity as a masquerade. Carrington's narrators assume the role of observer or artist as if to evade being reduced to the role of spectacle. However, the rituals of sacrifice, to which they inexorably fall victim, suggest a founding violence at the heart of the symbolic order.

Leonora Carrington's writing animates a problematic aspect of the Surrealist representation of women to which Surrealism is seemingly blind: the idealisation of 'woman' effects the suspension of women as objects rather than subjects of representation. Gwen Raaberg has written of the conflict between 'woman's' role as muse to the Surrealist imagination and the position of working women artists:

The Surrealists conceived of woman as man's mediator with nature and the unconscious, *femme-enfant*, muse, source and object of man's desire, embodiment of *amour fou* and emblem of revolution. The concept of "woman" objectified by male needs was in direct conflict with the individual woman's subjective need for self-definition and free artistic expression.¹

Thus, the avant-garde seems to reproduce in the margins of society the paradox at its heart: the idealisation of the 'feminine' which is a most insidious agent of the exclusion of women. The female artist engaged with the Surrealist project

¹ Gwen Raaberg, "The Problematics of Women and Surrealism," *Surrealism and Women*, ed. Mary Ann Caws^{et al} (London: MIT Press, 1991) 2-3.

encounters a conflict; an assumption of the implicitly masculine autonomy of the artist would seem to forfeit her sexual identity, which is itself constituted by an enigmatic femininity. The consequences of this dilemma are articulated by Susan Rubin Suleiman:

Now here is the crucial question: given the overwhelmingly male subject position of Surrealism, how did a number of women artists, who *did* produce works, manage to elaborate an imagery and a script that involved neither a masquerade of femininity nor male impersonation - which in aesthetic terms would result in purely formal imitation, the adopting of formal solutions without discovering them as a personal necessity.²

Carrington does not evade the question of masquerade and mimicry; she makes it the site of textual inquiry. Suleiman posits Irigaray's strategy of 'mimicry' - a means of negotiating male representation without being absorbed by it - as a solution to her own question. As Irigaray writes:

There is . . . perhaps only one 'path', the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it. . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. . . . It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function. *They also remain elsewhere*.³

It is the peculiar burden and gift of the iconoclast that she will always retain a sense of spectacle; the sense of femininity as a masquerade is persistent in Carrington's construction not only of her feral women's transgressions but also of her spectator-narrators' impossible attempts to displace themselves from the destination of the gaze. Moreover, Carrington pursues a profound and radical 'personal necessity' which dispenses with the protective mask of irony. A

² Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (London: Harvard University Press, 1990) 26.

³ Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 124. Suleiman writes: "In mimicry, a woman 'repeats' the male - in this case the male Surrealist - version of 'woman', but she does so in a self-conscious way that points up the citational, often ironic status of the repetition." Suleiman 27.

pervasive tone of ambivalence in her texts - expressed in melancholy, grief and rage - indicates an inquiry into the feminine as a state of exile and dispossession.

A critique of Surrealism's appropriations of the feminine could be traced in this anguish, but this critique does not stop at the culpability of the Surrealists. Indeed, the explosive shattering of identity undertaken in Carrington's texts fulfils the subversive intent of Surrealism with an unparalleled vigour. Through the theme of masquerade, Carrington explores the construction of female identity as spectacle in the symbolic order. She demonstrates the radical displacement to which this subjects women, and makes manifest the violence at the origin of representation. In pursuit of the apparent emptiness of femininity, Carrington's narratives discover savagery. They discover, in literal and symbolic form, a sacrifice of the feminine at the heart of the phallogentric symbolic order. Moreover, by revealing the aggression with which the feral women take their revenge, Carrington's texts place a voracious orality at the vacant centre of femininity.

"I Do Not See The Woman": Male Masquerade

Surrealism has been accused of misogyny in its obsessive objectification of women. Rudolf Kuenzli is one critic who has articulated this charge in an uncompromising fashion:

The Surrealists lived in their own masculine world, with their eyes closed, the better to construct their male phantasms of the feminine. They did not see woman as a subject, but as a projection, an object of their own dreams of femininity.⁴

His judgement underestimates the ambivalence of Surrealist imagery and is perhaps guilty of its own projection: it seems to hold the Surrealists accountable for the ideological constructions which they expose. Yet Kuenzli's terms - of

⁴ Rudolf Kuenzli, "Surrealism and Misogyny," *Dada/Surrealism* 18 (1990) 18.

image, fantasy and spectacle - capture the frame within which this debate takes place. It would appear that the Surrealists were dazzled and blinded by a vision of 'woman' as spectacle which eclipsed women as historical subjects.

This paradox is captured evocatively in the montage, constructed around Magritte's "I Do Not See the (Woman) Hidden in the Forest", which featured on a cover of the journal *La Révolution Surréaliste* in 1929.⁵ Magritte depicts a naked woman - her face averted and partly concealed by her hair, one hand drawn towards her breast in a futile gesture of modesty - surrounded by the script "I do not see - hidden in the forest". Her body substitutes for the withheld word in a visual pun which curiously mimics her. The montage frames Magritte's painting with snapshots of individual male Surrealists, all with their eyes closed. The closed eyes of the Surrealists teasingly hide the woman by averting their gaze but she remains doubly exposed: both in the canvas and within their imaginations, which guarantee that she will always be unveiled. As Briony Fer has written of this piece:

Their common fantasy (which they see in their dreams) centres on the female body that is represented by the painting, where the nude stands in for the absent word in the sentence. She is circumscribed by language, yet denotes what is 'hidden' in a 'forest' - the obscure and tangled landscape of the unconscious.⁶

Woman is most exposed, most vulnerable to male appropriation, when most 'hidden'. The forest within which she takes refuge is licensed to be mapped only by the male artist who is at liberty to enter and depart from it at will. The *femme sauvage* living in her female wilderness is already absorbed by the male symbolic; she has been cast there to set the scene for miraculous discoveries.

⁵ Reproduced in Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991).

⁶ Briony Fer, "Surrealism, Myth and Psychoanalysis," *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism*, ed. Briony Fer, David Batchelor and Paul Wood (London: Yale University Press, 1993) 178.

Breton's reception of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo is instructive in revealing this logic at work. Mexico was considered a "Surrealist place *par excellence*" (Breton)⁷ long before any Surrealist had set foot there - an exotic landscape colonised by the European imagination in advance. Kahlo's reputation had reached Breton before their first encounter. However, on his arrival in Mexico in 1938, Breton 'discovers' an exhibition of her work with the triumph of self justification rather than the humility of the tardy arrival:

My surprise and joy were unbounded when I discovered on my arrival in Mexico, that her work had blossomed forth, in her latest paintings, into pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself.⁸

Whitney Chadwick comments astutely on the assurance which permits Breton never to be outdone or anticipated:

Once again, the woman artist arrives intuitively at an ideological position created by man in her absence. Her work is devalued because it supports *a priori* theoretical positions without either shaping or expanding them.⁹

Kahlo herself repudiated Breton's efforts to claim her as a Surrealist, with an insistence which also speaks from Carrington's fantastic texts: "I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality."¹⁰

In Carrington's narratives of feral women - of women 'hidden in the forest' - the motif of woman as clothed animal betrays a deep ambivalence about the construction of female identity by the male symbolic order. Indeed, a profound unease about the nature of femininity, and a sense of being radically at odds with the feminine, pervades Carrington's texts. If, as Joan Rivière proposed, in "Womanliness and Masquerade," femininity is a masquerade - an empty signifier 'put on' by women - then it has little to tell of female identity except, perhaps, that there is no such thing:

⁷ Breton quoted in Chadwick 87.

⁸ Breton quoted in Chadwick 90.

⁹ Chadwick 90.

¹⁰ Quoted in Chadwick 66.

The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the 'masquerade'. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference; whether radical or superficial they are the same thing.¹¹

Culturally constructed and sanctioned femininity is an alienating masquerade. Its parodic artifice barely conceals its function to disguise, to draw a veil over, the emptiness of female identity. As Luce Irigaray writes: "'Femininity' is a role, an image, a value, imposed upon women by male systems of representation. In this masquerade of femininity, the woman loses herself, and loses herself by playing on her femininity."¹² The masquerade, then, is both a symptom and a source of the poverty of female subjectivity within a male symbolic order.

In "The Debutante," the hyena expresses ambivalence as the eponymous heroine's double, rather than outright rebellion. She enables the debutante to evade the position created for her by society, but she is also a version of her entry into that society. A hairier, smellier substitute for the debutante, the hyena illustrates a sense of imposture, of the incongruity between the corporeal body and the outward signifiers of femininity: the treacherous high heels, the long dress and gloves which bespeak concealment rather than adornment. Walter Benjamin writes of the fear of being recognised by animals under an entry entitled "Gloves," in "One-Way Street" (1925-6):

In an aversion to animals the predominant feeling is fear of being recognised by them through contact. The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognised. All disgust is originally disgust at touching. Even when the feeling is mastered, it is only by a drastic gesture that overleaps its mark: the nauseous is violently engulfed, eaten, while the zone of finest epidermal contact remains taboo.¹³

All the ambivalence of this aversion is manifest in "The Debutante," from the hyena's gloved paws to the drastic gesture of its consumption of the maid's face.

¹¹ Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as Masquerade," *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan (London: Methuen, 1986) 38.

¹² Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 130.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979) 50.

Yet the hyena is a poignant figure who "sadly" (HF 45) concedes a desire to be admitted into polite society and whose rejection by that society is the cause of her savage revenge.

In Carrington's novella, "Little Francis" (1937-8), a double displacement is equally at work. The narrative's account of Francis' 'elopement' with his Uncle Ubriaco and their hounding by his self-righteous daughter Amelia, cannot conceal in its familial relations the sexual narrative that it is encoding. The youth of Amelia and Francis merely indicate their feminine dependency on the father-figure of lover and husband. That a young woman who is in love with an older man is translated into the figure of a boy, and that this boy should himself unsuccessfully attempt to 'put on' the trappings of femininity, communicates a fundamental alienation from conventions of female identity:

Francis was tempted to try on a particular corset, a black one with faded purple lace and roses worked in gold thread. . . . He closed his eyes and tried to imagine a pair of ample, warm thighs in place of his own rather thin legs. . . . (HF 72)

The orphaned Francis, wise beyond his years and stoically enduring his fate, articulates a precarious sense of identity: "This is me, I must be careful, thought Francis" (HF 76).

A similar unease with the signifiers of femininity is explored in the writing of Angela Carter. Nudity, a return to the clothing of the skin, is represented as a liberation from socially constructed and constricting identity. When the eponymous heroine of Carter's "Wolf-Alice" in *The Bloody Chamber*, in her burgeoning sense of her human and female identity, dons an old ball gown the narrative drily has her mistaken for a disinterred corpse. In *The Magic Toyshop*, Melanie tries on the wedding gown of her "emphatically clothed"¹⁴ mother, but on finding herself locked out of the house in her garden in the middle of the night she suffers a kind of existential crisis. Nature seems to turn against her in the manner

¹⁴ Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago, 1967) 10.

of Carrington's grasping brambles - "branches, menacing, tore her hair and thrashed her face"¹⁵ - and in her effort to return to the refuge of her home she is stripped of her gown to a "new and final kind of nakedness."¹⁶

A vulnerability is expressed by exposure to the elements of nature in both Carter's and Carrington's texts; this vulnerability reveals itself in culture in the construction of compensatory protective shells. As Irigaray writes: "Woman is to be nude, since she cannot be located, cannot remain in her place. She attempts to envelop herself in clothes, make-up and jewellery. She cannot use the envelope that she *is*, and so she must create artificial ones."¹⁷ Woman's lack of place - her savage 'nakedness' - is not then remedied by an entry into culture. That entry is conditional upon the adoption of a vicarious and alienating identity. The trappings of femininity offer compensation for a lack - a provisional shelter for identity.

However, whereas for Carrington's female characters the masquerade initiates a crisis of identity, for her male characters it offers all the shameless 'feminine' play of dressing-up. Indeed, in Carrington's texts, the pleasures of masquerade are almost exclusively the prerogative of men.

The assumption of masquerade by men in Carrington's texts only confirms its gendered quality; Lacan observes that "the fact that femininity takes refuge in this mask . . . has the strange consequence that, in the human being, virile display itself appears as feminine."¹⁸ There is, perhaps, a sense of the narcissism of the male Surrealists in Carrington's depiction of male masquerade. However, its

¹⁵ Carter, *Magic Toyshop* 18.

¹⁶ Carter, *Magic Toyshop* 21. The relation of Carter's texts to those of Carrington is intriguing. Carter acknowledges a familiarity with Carrington's work, but her admission is brief and somewhat dismissive: "Leonora Carrington was British and wrote, still writes, prim, strange, surrealist fictions." Carter, *Expletives Deleted: Selected Writings* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992) 73.

¹⁷ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 169-70.

¹⁸ Lacan quoted in Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991) 34.

more devastating revelation is of the fragility of female identity within a male symbolic order. Sometimes whimsical and naïve but at other instances cruel and violent, male masquerade harbours a sinister appropriation by which women are radically displaced. If artifice and dissimulation constitute the only, albeit precarious, identity position for women, its assumption by men divests her of her only place.

In "As They Rode Along The Edge," Ignose the boar enjoys an innocent narcissism which seems impossible for the somewhat ascetic Virginia Fur. He hunts only to ornament his body and spends idle moonlit evenings admiring his reflection in the water. The "sumptuous outfit" (*SH* 7) he assembles in order to woo Virginia is not merely an appeal to her affections, but a tender tribute to his own self-love:

No animal or bird ever looked so splendid as did Ignose in his attire of love. Attached to his curly head was a young nightjar. . . . A wig of squirrels' tails and fruit hung around Ignose's ears, pierced for the occasion by two little pikes he had found dead on the lakeshore. His hoofs were dyed red by the blood of a rabbit he had crushed while galloping, and his active body was enveloped by a purple cape . . . (He hid his russet buttocks, as he did not want to show all his beauty at one go). (*SH* 7-8)

Similarly, Jumart, in his sensuously fluid outfit of rich colours and delicate detail, is the dandyish object of Drusille's desire in "The Sisters":

His long, iron grey beard flowed over his green satin coat embroidered with butterflies and the royal monogram. On his superb head he wore an enormous gold wig with rose-coloured shadows, like a cascade of honey. A variety of flowers, growing here and there in his wig, moved in the wind. (*SH* 45-6)

Yet, like Ignose, his narcissism seems to lead to solipsistic reverie. While Ignose's indulgence proves fatal - he is shot by hunters while transfixed by his own reflection - Jumart, and also Uncle Ubriaco in "Little Francis," are shown to be almost imperceptibly drifting into an oblivion of self-love. Jumart becomes "distracted," his expression "ecstatic," as he is "enchanted with his deep reflections" (*SH* 47), while Drusille, stricken by jealousy and foreboding, sees "little corpses" in the trees and "drowned bodies" (*SH* 48) in the clouds.

Similarly, Ubriaco seems to constantly inhabit another element, whether he be submerged in the river dallying with the fishes or in a narcotic haze. While Francis suffers his petty cruelties, it seems to be the whimsical Ubriaco who maintains a certain unknowing innocence. Despite his youth, it is Francis whose experience is filtered through the knowledge of loss and grief. His mournful gravity sets him irreversibly apart from Ubriaco's self-indulgent ease: "[Ubriaco] was naked but for a green fishing hat decorated with salmon flies. Francis felt slightly sad as he watched him: he felt he would never love anybody so much as Uncle Ubriaco" (*HF* 96).

When the self-reflexivity of Ignose, Jumart and Ubriaco is manifested in St. Alexander and Monsieur Cyril de Guindre it becomes homoerotic and displaces women even more decisively. St. Alexander's particular narcissism in "As They Rode Along the Edge," is mediated through religious piety. It takes the form of proud humility and masochistic ascetism. While he boasts an otherworldly disregard for his bodily needs - "'I am poor, very, very poor. I eat only once a week, and this solitary meal is sheep's droppings'" (*SH* 5) - his ostensibly despised body is housed in a highly compensatory luxury. The splendour of the interior of his "Church of St. Alexander" represents an idolatrous temple to self-love in which Alexander himself figures much larger than Jesus: "Velvet cushions in ash pink, bibles of real silver, and *My Unblemished Life, or The Rosaries of the Soul of Saint Alexander* by himself, this in a binding of peacock blue jewels" (*SH* 5). Furthermore, Alexander exhibits, "with a certain pride" (*SH* 5), a garden built to his own design. It contains a number of highly elaborate instruments of self-mortification which betray a strong sense of anal eroticism. If they depict female sexuality at all it is as the 'vagina dentata' of the fanged mouths:

chairs made of wire . . . enormous, smiling mouths with pointed, poisonous teeth; underwear of reinforced concrete full of scorpions and adders; cushions made of millions of black mice biting one another - when the blessed buttocks were elsewhere. (*SH* 5)

Yet even in this most exclusively masculine playground an appropriation of a certain form of femininity is at work; St. Alexander boasts that "little Theresa never thought of underwear of reinforced concrete" (*SH* 5) and so usurps the peculiarly female ingenuity for masochistic ecstasy to which the legends of popular Catholicism bear witness.

The whimsy and Catholic kitsch of Alexander's "garden of the little Flowers of Mortification" (*SH* 5) recalls that of Ronald Firbank, to whom Ernest Jones attributes both a dislike of women and an "entirely feminine sensibility".¹⁹ Such a double exclusion takes place in Carrington's "Monsieur Cyril de Guindre." Women are represented as physically nauseating and Cyril's unwanted teenage daughter Panthilde appears in his garden like a return of the repressed, to corrupt the exquisitely 'feminine' sensibilities of Cyril's home. The opening of the narrative finds Cyril reclining on a couch "moving like a tired snake" (*SH* 34) and distractedly playing with his cat, as if to conceal his evident awareness that "despite his age, he was very beautiful" (*SH* 34). Cyril is afflicted by the cultivated sensitivity and ennui of an aesthete; his eyes are wearied by the green of his garden and the gaze of his cat - he languishes in a "halo of perfume" (*SH* 34), "dreaming amongst the scents" (*SH* 39) and drifting between a languorous consciousness in the "heavy, balmy spring afternoon" (*SH* 34) and narcotically induced hallucination. The scene of aesthetic indolence resembles the opening of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

The studio was filled with the rich odour of roses, and when the light summer wind stirred amidst the trees of the garden, there came through the open door the heavy scent of the lilac, or the more delicate perfume of the pink-flowering thorn.

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms

¹⁹ Ernest Jones, "Introduction to Three Novels," *Ronald Firbank: Memoirs and Critiques*, ed. Mervyn Horder (London: Duckworth, 1977) 188.

of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flame-like as theirs. . . .²⁰

Indeed, Carrington plays the scene as a camp comedy of manners. Thibaut's theatrical exchanges with Cyril are imbued with febrile jealousies - "His hand trembled a little as he arranged the lace on his chest" (*SH* 35). Moreover, Carrington's text seems to allude to the bible of *fin de siècle* decadence: J.-K Huysman's *Against Nature*.

Huysman 's anti-hero, Des Esseintes, constructs an environment of astounding artifice which both mimics and exceeds in profligacy the productions of the natural world; in revolt against nature, he commits "acts of sensual depravity".²¹ The meal which is served in Carrington's "Monsieur Cyril de Guindre" seems to emulate the cultivated perversities of Des Esseintes. It consists of foods rendered strangely insipid by fantastic preparations; chilled, creamed, marinated and perfumed, each dish is transformed from its origins in flesh and fibre:

A plump fat chicken with stuffing made of brains and the livers of thrushes, truffles, crushed sweet almonds, rose conserve with a few drops of some divine liqueur. This chicken, which had been marinated - plucked but alive - for three days, had in the end been suffocated in vapours of boiling patchouli: its flesh was as creamy and tender as a fresh mushroom.

A chilled asparagus mousse and creamed oysters were followed by a procession of strange and succulent cakes, all white, yet as varied as the animals in a zoological garden. (*SH* 39)

The materials of artifice are themselves fetishised in this narrative; the textures and colours of fabrics imaginatively assembled and lovingly detailed to create a fantastic display of narcissism. Thibaut's new outfit translates the pelts of creatures into the realm of culture by excluding any resonance of the bestial:

"The trousers are to be made of rosy beige fur, and very delicately striped in another colour, like the pants of a Persian cat. The shirt will be of a very pale green like the feathers of a dying kingfisher, half hidden by an acid blue jacket, brilliant like the scales of a fish." (*SH* 39)

²⁰ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 1985) 23.

²¹ J.-K Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1959) 26.

Carrington seems to grant the pleasures of narcissism only to men. The Catholic dimension to Carrington's texts suggests that robes and incense are an exclusively male prerogative. Indeed, male masquerade often has ecclesiastical overtones in Carrington's narratives: in "Monsieur Cyril de Guindre" the servant Dominique has "the gestures of a Jesuit" (*SH* 37) and the "little boy dressed as an angel" (*SH* 39), who provides musical accompaniment, is a mainstay of Catholic homoerotic whimsy. Indeed, when Cyril complacently kisses his own reflection he does so with the authority of wearing, with his angora gown, "the Pope's striped socks'" (*SH* 37).

Cyril's 'femininity' is beyond the aspiration of any woman since he has no female body to betray a base corporeality. Until Panthilde's appearance, female sexuality is associated only with reproduction. Cyril's wife's pregnancy has led, almost inevitably, to her incarceration in a "sanitorium" (*SH* 36); it confirms the treacherous and ungovernable properties of the female sexual organs and their link to insanity. Moreover, pregnancy is the manifestation of the degrading corporeality of women:

"I committed the indiscretion of taking a woman an uncivilised creature, painfully lacking in delicacy. Lacking as was her wont, she became pregnant. . . The grossness of her physique during those nine months made me fall quite ill." (*SH* 35-6)

Where Cyril's idyll of male narcissism is a fool's paradise, albeit an endearing one, the nature of masquerade in "Pigeon, Fly!" is much more sinister. It has the uncanny effect of mimicry. At her encounter with Ferdinand, the narrator Eleanor is "at a complete loss in making out the person's sex" (*SH* 20): "I thought it was a woman" (*SH* 19). While the "long, straight hair" (*SH* 19), the "scent of heliotrope and vanilla", the "very white face" and "lips painted reddish purple" (*SH* 20) are the crudest signifiers of female gender - or the masquerade of femininity which marks the female - the person's voice, though soft, betrays his masculinity. Furthermore, his horse's "rounded" contours and "rosy" hues of a

"strange kind of pink with purple shadows the colour of ripe plums" (*SH* 19), and the "round and sleek" horses "black as muscat grapes" (*SH* 22) which draw the carriage, are invested with a symbolism of fruit and fecundity of a curiously vaginal quality. In their purple, black and crimson colours, heavily made-up faces, long hair and wigs, Ferdinand's company of men have the studiously artificial appearance of the Restoration Court, a society whose dissimulations approaches self-parody.²²

Indeed, this is not the sensual, if self-indulgent, dressing up of Cyril and Thibaut, whose costumes have the auto-erotic intimacies of a "second skin" (*SH* 39). On the contrary, Celestin has the uncanny appearance of an automaton: "I followed the enormous walking wig like a sleep walker" (*SH* 25). The parody of femininity is cynical and hostile. The men are "made up like whores" (*SH* 28), as if to offer the female narrator her own portrait in their eyes. Celestin's "immense black wig", which falls in "stiff curls down to his feet" (*SH* 23), recalls the figure of Ignose in "As They Rode Along the Edge." Indeed, where Virginia Fur is "afraid of Ignose's beauty" (*SH* 8) Agathe is also dazzled, but rather with astonished dread than desire:

He threw off his clothes, dropping his gown of feathers to the ground. He was naked. If the feathers were white, his body was blindingly so. I think he must have painted it with some phosphorescent paint, for it shone like the moon. He wore blue stockings with red stripes. (*SH* 26)

"Pigeon, Fly!" is one of Carrington's narratives of her spectator-narrators, in which femininity is revealed to be constituted by masquerade; it is constructed as a spectacle determined by male systems of representation. The effect of this

²² As Stallybrass and White have written, "the court of Charles II itself made a farce of the chivalric and classical icons of aristocratic and regal identity. . . . [it] projected a collective image of living in ironic and even defiant incompatibility with its inherited forms of public representation." Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986) 101.

reduction on the body of the spectator-narrator is to render literal a metaphorical disembodiment.

Spectacle and Sacrifice

In a number of first person narratives, in which the female narrator takes the role of spectator, observer or even artist, Carrington dramatises a sequence of symbolic exchanges in which identity itself is at stake. Teresa De Lauretis writes that there is a crucial and defining conjunction between woman, spectacle and sexual difference:

The representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty - and the concurrent representation of the female body as the *locus* of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze) is so pervasive in our culture that it necessarily constitutes a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference and its ideological effects in the construction of social subjects, its presence in all forms of subjectivity.²³

Carrington's narratives seem to demonstrate the gendering of the look. In doing so, they demonstrate the dynamics of a system of cultural production which represents 'woman' at the expense of women. As Irigaray writes:

Investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance. In our culture the predominance of the look over smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality.²⁴

"Pigeon, Fly!" is one of a number of first person narratives which demonstrate the danger for a woman of becoming her own spectator. Carrington's feral women are spectacles of transgression in whose dynamism the authorial presence

²³ Teresa de Lauretis quoted in Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 110.

²⁴ Irigaray quoted in Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988) 50.

is invested: "this was something to see" (*SH* 3) comments the narrator appreciatively of Virginia Fur's flight through the forest. However, the self-effacing female narrators are unable to sustain the invulnerability of the spectator. Apparently chance occurrences draw them swiftly and inevitably towards a complicity with the depletion or dissolution of other women or even themselves.²⁵ In "The Oval Lady," the narrator becomes an inadvertent witness to Lucretia's father's violent intervention into the fantasy life which sustains her. His destruction of the rocking-horse which is her fantastic double, negates Lucretia's own existence. Deprived of her companion, she seems to suffer a fateful dissolution: "Her shrill voice grew thinner and thinner, and she was soon kneeling in a pool of water. I was afraid that she was going to melt away" (*HF* 43). Thus, the compensatory female fantasy of identity is reduced to a phantom incorporeality by the scrutiny of patriarchal law. In "The Royal Summons" (1937-8), the narrator becomes the actual agent of sacrifice. Furthermore, in "Pigeon, Fly!" Eleanor experiences a vertiginous crisis in the dizzying sensation of watching herself being watched. She is made complicit in the strange dissolution of her double Agathe, a fate she is destined to share. Finally, in "White Rabbits" (1941) the narrator's curiosity and voyeurism is repaid with the ultimate penalty of bodily disintegration.

The narratives of the spectator-narrators seem to tend inevitably towards one destination: the sacrifice of a woman. The first person narration might be assumed to offer a certain autonomy, but the narrators are insidiously divested of the anonymity to which their objectivity aspires. Moreover, the dynamic of events retrospectively implicates and imperils them. Chance occurrences lead to a

²⁵ Chance is a category of central symbolic significance to Surrealism. As Margaret Cohen has written: "Chance becomes the moment when the habitual veil of repression is rent, allowing a true hidden order of things to surge forth." Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (London: University of California Press, 1993) 135.

most inflexible dilemma - coincidence hardens into fate. The seemingly arbitrary sequence of encounters and discoveries conspire to reveal an inexorable logic.

The series of comic misunderstandings which involve the somewhat hapless narrator of "A Royal Summons," quickly escalate into horror. The narrator honours her engagement with the Queen, despite her indisposition, merely out of mild self-interest: "I didn't like the idea of my long journey being wasted" (*HF* 50). When she finds herself delegated to attend a Cabinet meeting, "embarrassment" (*HF* 52) prevents her from extracting herself from their assassination plans. She honours the masculine code of "sporting instincts" (*HF* 52-3) inherited from her father by attending the draughts tournament which will appoint the assassin. She wins by default on the grounds that she is the only one not to cheat; the female narrator betrays herself by her act of male mimicry. She finds herself employed by a company of evidently infantile men to murder a monarch who, despite her constitutionally impersonal role, is a touchingly maternal figure. With endearing immodesty, the Queen invites the narrator to share her bath, which is already occupied by live sponges. In her distraction, the Queen bathes in goats' milk, waters the flowers in her carpet and feeds her horses on jam. The sentence passed against her - to be thrown to the lions - is exceptionally savage.

The sacrifice of this nurturing figure, the source and symbol of food, seems more than an act of political expediency: it is an act of aggression against the feminine. The narrator is the only one to express any regret at the Queen's death but her identification exceeds simple sympathy. The narrator is simultaneously the agent *and* the victim of the violent impulses of the men; she is terrorised into fulfilling her promise by a menacing tree which recalls the grasping and piercing branches in "As They Rode Along The Edge" and "The Seventh Horse." It provokes an instinctual sexual dread: "I would have liked to turn back, but I was afraid of the cypress and what it might be able to do with its hairy black branches" (*SH* 54).

In "Pigeon, Fly!", the artist narrator Eleanor's apparently chance acceptance of Celestin's commission sets in motion a narrative which unfolds with an uncanny logic towards a point before its opening. Eleanor finds herself retrospectively implicated in events which lead to complicity in her own fate. The subject of her portrait is revealed to be the corpse of a young woman whose skin is "phosphorescent, luminous and vaguely mauve" (*SH* 24). That Eleanor's immortalisation of Agathe's features is illumined, as night falls, by corpse light, suggests a strangely symbiotic relationship between them; Eleanor's discovery that she has painted her own face emphasises this self-reflexivity. Employed by a company of men to unwittingly take part in their morbid rite, the female artist is conflated with the female object/victim.

Carrington's narrative seems to posit sacrifice as the origin of art: it affirms a link proposed by Elisabeth Bronfen "between the artist and the mourner, between representation and revenants."²⁶ Eleanor's femininity sabotages the 'masculinity' of her profession and she herself suffers the depletion of the female subject, becoming the the victim of Celestin's "gloomy ritual" (*SH* 23). As Marina Warner writes of Carrington's narrative:

Art becomes a sentence of death, or at least a prophecy of a fatal conclusion in this story; like Helen, who wove the story of Troy and her part in its destruction into the tapestry she was making during the siege, Leonora's artist protagonist finds her own fate in the canvas.²⁷

The collapsing of their identities is confirmed when Eleanor finds Agathe's diary not only addressed to herself, but also anticipating her tears both of sympathy *and* suffering. The adopted invisibility of the artist returns to haunt her as she learns the emptiness of the object of her gaze.

Agathe's diary recounts the prolonged agony of dissolution which is the price paid for Celestin's flight. He achieves a parodic, over-determined femininity -

²⁶ Bronfen 330.

²⁷ Marina Warner, introduction, *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*, Leonora Carrington (London: Virago, 1989) n.p.

and an ability to triumph over gravity - apparently through the absorption of women.²⁸ Celestin's feathered outfit, which he wears on their wedding night, suggests both the "'Angel of Death'" (*SH* 26) and the rapist swan. His dazzling energies enact some fundamental depletion upon Agathe: "I am so sad, Eleanor, so sad that my body has become transparent" (*SH* 27). As if in mockery of her own decline and in complicity with Celestin, the furniture begins to sprout "small, fragile leaves of a tender green" (*SH* 28). Male masquerade has literally displaced her, and Agathe's final attempt to restore her bodily integrity and identity is both ironic and futile: "'I only put on fancy dress to make myself feel more solid, more substantial'" (*SH* 28). Agathe attempts to preserve herself on canvas when her mirror image begins to fade, but the attempt to see herself through others' eyes only hastens her decline: "'Every day, Eleanor, I lose myself a little more, yet I've never loved my face more. I try to paint my portrait so as to have it near me still, you understand. But . . . I can't. I elude myself'" (*SH* 27). The diary not only predicts but seems to enact Eleanor's fate. Thus, the two women become complicit in each others destiny; they both internalise the annihilating gaze of the spectator and learn the existential emptiness of the spectacle: "I turned to her portrait: the canvas was empty, I didn't dare look for my face in the mirror. I knew what I would see. . . ." (*SH* 29).

The curiously swift absorption of the narrators into their own narratives, and the vertiginous sensation with which they meet their fate betrays a sense of compulsion. In "The Oval Lady," the narrator expresses a naïve fascination with the "very tall thin lady" (*HF* 37) and speculates whether the interior of the house will mimic Lucretia's dimensions. In her child-like perspective, the narrator

²⁸ There is a resemblance between Carrington's Celestin and the character of Rosencreutz in Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*. Carter's character would appear to be inspired by the figure of Christian Rosenkreuz, the apocryphal founder of a seventeenth century mystical order dedicated to the pursuit of arcane knowledge, including alchemy and the prolongation of life. In both Carter's and Carrington's texts, the latter is attempted through the sacrifice of a young woman.

seems miniaturised and, Alice-like, her initiation into the entrance hall is also into a realm of distorted dimensions: "seen from the back, the lady seemed even taller. She was at least ten feet tall" (*HF* 38). Unusually, the protagonist is able to evade involvement in the climax of events by a simple expedient, which is itself highly suggestive of her clandestine position: "I don't think [Lucretia's father] had noticed I was there. I hid behind the door . . . " (*HF* 43). However, in her compulsion to see, she is transfixed by the figure of Lucretia static in her window: "My eyes kept being drawn to the quivering feather: it was so restless in the window where nothing else was moving!" (*HF* 37). Her obsessive return to the scene - "This was the seventh time I had passed in front of this window" (*HF* 37) - betrays a voyeuristic impulse: "I wanted to know, I was devoured by curiosity, an irresistible desire took hold of me to enter the house, simply to find out" (*HF* 37).

Whereas in "A Royal Summons," "The Oval Lady," and "Pigeon, Fly!" the sacrifice is, at least initially displaced onto a double, in "White Rabbits" it is the narrator herself who becomes the victim of the narrative and of a dissolution most redolent of revulsion: leprosy. Moreover, it is the narrator's very status as objective spectator which draws her towards a fate which punitively repays her gaze.

The unnamed narrator of "White Rabbits" presents herself as an outsider surprised by her host city's charred and pestilent appearance. "This is not the way that I had imagined New York," she coolly comments of the "reddish black" houses and the "plague-ridden residence" (*SH* 56) facing her own apartment at 40, Pest Street. The narrator leads an apparently eventless and solitary existence. She registers no sense of foreboding in an environment both archaically Biblical and futuristically apocalyptic. At the opening of the narrative, her perspective becomes compromised by an oppressive heat, which seems to suspend time, and the thick air which renders "visibility troubled and hazy" (*SH* 56). Despite the obstructing light the narrator sets herself to 'consider' the house opposite with the

confidence that "my eyes have always been excellent" (*SH* 56) and thus begins a voyeuristic obsession.

Perhaps imagining herself an equal object of interest to her neighbours, she undresses and exercises in her open window only after "several days" (*SH* 56) surveillance have betrayed no sign of occupancy. Seating herself, somewhat vertiginously, on her tiny balcony she conceals her hanging head behind her long wet hair. There follows an almost hallucinatory sequence of sudden shrinking and expansion of perspective reminiscent of *Alice in Wonderland*, to which the title of the story must surely allude. The narrator's gaze rests somewhat microscopically on a bluebottle futilely "suck[ing] the dry corpse of a spider" (*SH* 57) then it is drawn to "something . . . ominously quiet for an aeroplane" (*SH* 57) which transforms itself into a raven. Peering through her hair as if through curtains, the narrator witnesses a repetition of this "unpleasant repast" (*SH* 57) on the opposite balcony which is now uncannily inhabited by a woman like herself with long black hair. The woman's flirtatious manner - "she tossed her head coquettishly and gave me a very elegant salute after the fashion of a queen" (*SH* 57) - seems to confirm the narrator's voyeuristic role. Curiosity prompts the narrator to rot some meat for her neighbour. The single starving insect of preceding events multiplies into a "flight of rancorous bluebottles" (*SH* 58), whose shifting, swarming decomposition anticipate the narrator's encounter with the object of her gaze.

On approaching her neighbour's door, the narrator finds it disintegrating and imploding even on her touch; a "cascade of something" (*SH* 58) conceals the front door, the bell pull comes away in her hand and the door caves inwards as she pushes it. The house crumbles away as if it were the fantastic projection of the narrator's imagination, constantly receding from reality. Indeed, the dark Gothic interior offers itself as other to its American setting. The greenness of Ethel's dress and the whiteness of her skin contrast with the red and black surroundings. Ethel, and the suggestively named Lazarus, have a festive appearance in sparkling

contrast to the dull haze of the atmosphere. Their "identical glittering skin" is like "tinsel on a Christmas tree" (SH 59) and "speckled with thousands of minute stars" (SH 58). Yet evidently this is a macabre, even supernatural festivity. Their "dead white" skin has the luminosity of a corpse and Ethel's "ancient beautiful dress of green silk" (SH 58) is redolent not of fertility but of the secretions of decay. Brought to the point of confrontation and infection with the most fearful image of bodily dissolution - "the holy disease of the Bible, leprosy!" (SH 60) - the narrator's flight is nevertheless marked with the morbid fascination of the voyeur: "some unholy curiosity made me look over my shoulder as I reached the front door and I saw [Ethel] waving her hand over the banister, and as she waved it, her fingers fell off and dropped to the ground like shooting stars" (SH 60). Turning back like Lot's wife she is frozen and enchanted by a vision of her own fate.

The macabre fantasy of Carrington's narratives, exemplified by "White Rabbits," betrays a dark Romanticism. Indeed, the Gothic imagination of Edgar Allen Poe is evoked in theme of a portrait living at the expense of its subject. The narrative of "Pigeon Fly!" is not only reminiscent of Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but also of Poe's production of beautiful corpses in "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait," whose title Carrington's "The Oval Lady" seems to echo. In Poe's "The Oval Portrait," a traveller happens upon a portrait of astonishingly lifelike quality only to discover - in a written account of its genesis - that the canvas was completed at the expiration of its model, the artist's wife. There is a striking similarity between this plot and that of Carrington's "Pigeon, Fly!", a affinity brought out by Bronfen's account of Poe's narrative: "Two uncanny moments end the narrative, conflating model and image, the living and the dead - a literal deanimation of the woman and a figural animation of the portrait."²⁹ The

²⁹ Bronfen 115.

portrait, seeking to reproduce and immortalise its subject, acquires its life at the expense of her death. Lacan writes that the symbol "manifests itself first of all as the murder of the thing":³⁰ the portrait effaces the countenance it assumes to honour and so becomes a posthumous memorial. Furthermore, in Poe's "Ligeia," the bereaved protagonist animates his dead wife by the will of his grief, effectively extinguishing the life of his second, substitute wife. The dead Ligeia is resurrected in the corpse of Rowena; the revenant functions as a metaphor of the uncanny proximity of woman and death.³¹

Bronfen accounts for this association of woman and death: "Woman, constructed by culture as man's symptom, marks the site where repressed material resurfaces, materialises, returns. The feminine body is used to figure death as the repressed *par excellence*."³² The curious exchanges which take place in Carrington's narratives confirm the proximity between femininity and death of which Bronfen writes:

The equation between femininity and death is such that while in cultural narratives the feminine corpse is treated like an artwork, or the beautiful woman is killed to produce an artwork, conversely, artworks emerge only at the expense of a beautiful woman's death and are treated like feminine corpses.³³

This morbid aesthetic is exemplified in Edgar Allen Poe's declaration that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world".³⁴ The beautiful corpses by which Poe is transfixed, seem to prefigure the arrested, excavated and dismembered female forms of Surrealist fascination. Carrington revisits Poe's preoccupations with memory and death, burial and

³⁰ Quoted in Bronfen 27.

³¹ The impasse of memory which preoccupies "Ligeia" is comparable to the uncanny temporality of Carrington's texts: "in our endeavours to recall to memory something long forgotten, we often find ourselves *upon the very verge* of remembrance, without being able, in the end, to remember." Edgar Allen Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1986) 113.

³² Bronfen 165.

³³ Bronfen 72-3.

³⁴ Edgar Allen Poe quoted in Bronfen 59.

commemoration. However, in the testimonies of the spectator-narrators, Carrington rewrites this uncanny script. Writing from the 'other side', she occupies the place of the 'corpse': the objectified female form.

A fear of becoming the sacrifice - of being transformed into the corpse - seems evident in the narrator's encounter with an abominable feast in "White Rabbits." The rabbits of the title demonstrate an excess of bestiality belied by nursery anthropomorphism and consequently returning with all the more horror: "With a sensation of deep disgust, I backed into a corner and saw her throw the carrion among the rabbits, who fought like wolves for the meat" (*SH* 59). Moreover, metaphors of devouring - of cannibalism and vampirism - pervade the whole of Carrington's work. Unlike the waning spectator-narrators of "Pigeon, Fly!" and "White Rabbits," the feral women become consumers in order to escape being consumed. Violence erupts in Carrington's texts in the form of barbaric acts of oral aggression.

Savage Returns: Rituals of Revolt

Sonia Assa has observed the symbolic centrality of themes of devouring in Carrington's writing: "In a fictional world dominated by magic, perversion and anarchic excess, food elaboration and food consumption are posited as the central act of the narrative."³⁵ The consumption of 'raw' foods by the feral women emphasises their exile from culture, the realm of the 'cooked'; as Assa writes of Carrington's flesh-eaters, they are "utterly 'raw' and still becoming more so through their diet."³⁶ In eating flesh they declare themselves flesh incarnate.³⁷

³⁵ Sonia Assa, "Gardens of Delight or What's Cookin'? Leonora Carrington in the Kitchen," *Studies in Twentieth Century American Literature* 15:2 (1991) 213-4.

³⁶ Assa 220.

The feral women return as phantoms of repressed female orality, not merely flesh-eaters but cannibals and vampires coloured with the vivid flush of archaic fears:

Women are greedy of children; they suck the vigour of their menfolk like the Vampire; they are sexually insatiable. . . . And to what purpose are men born of women? Only in the end to die. The grave and woman are equally insatiable. (Solomon)³⁸

The narrative of "As They Rode Along The Edge" is propelled by a ranging appetite whose indiscriminacy renders Virginia Fur a literal manifestation of the woman "greedy of children": "Every night she went out on her wheel to hunt . . . several days per week she was forced to live on lost sheepdog, and occasionally mutton or child. . ." (SH 4). Indeed, she dines on a "funeral feast" (SH 10) of six of the seven little boars which she has borne to the dead Ignose. The hunger for flesh functions as a metaphor for sexual desire and Ignose makes a timely appearance as Virginia Fur is tending her cooking-pot. Virginia's frenzied love-making with Ignose under a "mountain of cats" (SH 9) is preceded by a ritual of oral aggression provoked by Ignose's formal speech of seduction:

Virginia, trembling, spat hard into the fire, a curse on the words of love. . . . Then she spat into the stewpot and put her lips into the boiling liquid and swallowed a big mouthful. With a savage cry she brought her head back out of the pot. . . . (SH 8)

To St. Alexander's entreaties to conversion, Virginia retorts that she has sold her soul "a long time ago for a kilo of truffles" (SH 4). Her chorus of cats are similarly incorruptible in their loyalty to the principle of appetite: "Saint Alexander mounted the pulpit and explained that he was going to perform a miracle: everyone hoped he was talking about food" (SH 6).

³⁷ Joan Jacobs Brumberg writes of the association between the eating of flesh and carnality: "No food (other than alcohol) caused Victorian women and girls a greater anxiety than meat. The flesh of animals was considered a heat-producing food that stimulated production of blood and fat as well as passion. Doctors and patients shared a common conception of meat as a food that stimulated sexual development and activity." Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988) 176.

³⁸ Solomon quoted in Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1948) 448-9.

St. Alexander's attempt to entice Virginia into his church with the prospect of its "pretty" appearance, the "marvel" of its location and the spectacle of "apparitions" (SH 4) is the gesture of bribing the pagan. However, the Christian Eucharist is itself exposed as a barbaric rite. St. Alexander's promise, made on the "head of the little baby Jesus" (SH 4), is rendered ambiguous by the knowledge that infant flesh is not unknown to Virginia's palate. The offer of such a tender morsel seems fulfilled when St. Alexander summons up a "fat lamb with baneful eyes" (SH 6). It is swiftly consumed by the cats in a blasphemously literal manifestation of Christian symbolism, to which Virginia concludes "'little Jesus is dead, and we've had a fine dinner'" (SH 7). The culmination of the sly substitutions by which the cultural authority of St. Alexander is undermined comes when, having celebrated Mass and about to feast on Igame's corpse, St. Alexander finds himself the target of sacrifice. He becomes the literal victim of what Helena Lewis terms "a favourite pastime of French intellectuals":³⁹ *manger du prêtre*, that is, priest-eating.⁴⁰

In "The Sisters," the savage female is again constructed through a ravenous appetite which itself also stands for desire. The kitchen is set as the bloody heart of the house. Fittingly it is the scene of an elaborate excess of slaughter: "Pomegranates and melons stuffed with larks filled the kitchen: whole oxen were turning slowly on the spits, pheasants, peacocks, and turkeys awaited their turn to be cooked" (SH 43). The delicate natural exchange of nectar, symbolised by the "butterflies, fruit, bees" (SH 43) which are crushed by the torrents of Drusille's tempest at the opening of the narrative, is elaborated into a more macabre exchange: the "old wooden casks" in the cellar contain "blood, honey, and wine" (SH 43) as if they were equivalent. The embroidered butterflies, honey wig and

³⁹ Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990) 29.

⁴⁰ Sonia Assa finds a similarly "blasphemous Christian rite" in "The Sisters": "wine and blood stand metaphorically for each other. Blood: a manifestation of feminine sexuality is/or wine: it's (masculine) transformation and sublimation in the eucharist." Assa 219.

flowers with which Jumart has decorated himself mark him out as an ambiguous object of desire, a rather literal enticement to Drusille's appetite. Drusille's desire is mirrored by her sister Juniper's vampiric thirst for blood, the rawest of meals. Furthermore, in "Monsieur Cyril de Guindre," Panthilde seems to offer herself as an abominable repast, the blood-like "black and sticky" (SH 38) substance on her lips in contrast to the 'cooked' appearance of Cyril's companions. Thibaut has a "golden skin like the corpse of a child preserved in an old and excellent liqueur" (SH 34-5), while Dominique is a "bloated young man who looked like a plump hen cooked in aromatic stock" (SH 37). In the homoerotic atmosphere of "Monsieur Cyril De Guindre," their skin is imbued with invitations to the consuming gaze but its glazed and cultivated appearance belies any bloody depths.

Deprived of liberty and debilitated by hunger, Juniper in "The Sisters" represents female appetite under constraint and recalls again an infamous victim to the principle of female insatiability: Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*. Intemperate passion is held to be the cause of Bertha's insanity and, raging in her attic, she is a monstrous, inflated spectre of desire; "'She sucked the blood,'" testifies Mason of his sister, "'she said she'd drain my heart'" (Brontë)⁴¹ and so, indeed, does Juniper. Battening rapturously on a hapless maid, she acquires not simply the uncanny levitation of Celestin - whose blood-red lips drained Agathe in "Pigeon, Fly!" - but the splendour of a gorgeous creature of flight, quite upstaging the peacock-men of Carrington's texts:

She sucked, sucked for long minutes, and her body became enormous, luminous, magnificent. Her feathers shone like snow in the sun, her tail sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow. She threw back her head and crowed like a cock. (SH 48)

The drama of devouring which animates Carrington's texts originates in the conjunction of femininity and materiality. Narratives driven by an uncanny logic

⁴¹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Everyman, 1980) 209.

of chance and compulsion reveal symbolic rituals in which the female body falls victim to disembodiment and death. The suggestion of a hidden logic of sacrifice seems confirmed by the recurrence with which the body of a woman is converted into a corpse. It is in resistance to this logic that both the feral women and the spectator narrators engage in drastic strategies of evasion.

The spectators fall victim to a rapid disembodiment even as they record their own fate; their diminishing bodies mimic their self-effacing speech. Indeed, their waning flesh emulates the testimony of an anorexic decline. Joan Jacobs Brumberg suggests that the anorexic uses "both her appetite and her body as a substitute for rhetorical behaviour."⁴² Anorexia has been interpreted as a condition within which women register a refusal of their social role; that such a protest should be situated in, and symbolically articulated through the body, suggests that this crisis of identity arises from women's relation to language and from the association of femininity and materiality.⁴³ However, the punitive self-denial of the anorexic is suggestive of a submission to sacrifice in the form of martyrdom. As Maud Ellmann has written, this 'hunger strike' is "a self-defeating protest, since it is women who become the victims of their own

⁴² Brumberg 168. The spectator narrators not only resemble the anorexic, but also the figure of the hysteric. As Elizabeth Grosz writes, the hysteric "'articulates' a corporeal discourse; her symptoms 'speak' on her behalf." Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1989) 135.

⁴³ Caroline Walker Bynum detects in the modern anorexic's refusal, a trace of the female faster's negotiation with her role as corrupt flesh incarnate: "Women understood themselves to be symbols of the flesh, saw fasting and other forms of asceticism as weapons for routing that flesh." Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London: University of California Press, 1987) 217. Kim Chernin employs a psychoanalytical analysis of the female child's relation to the maternal body and the mother. She suggests that the infant's misrecognition of its own appetite as depleting the mother is enjoined with the girl's real recognition of the mother's reduced status as a woman in the patriarchal world: the mother's self-sacrifice becomes the "horrifying image of the mother as literal food sacrifice." Chernin, *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1985) 127.

revolt".⁴⁴ In contrast to the spectators, the feral women seem to be driven by a furious oral aggression which supplants the power of speech. The insatiable appetites of the feral women posit a body which will not be absorbed by the sacrificial symbolic economy. The feral women forego all discursive negotiations; the projecting voice is replaced by the insatiable incorporating mouth.

However, this reckless vengeance seems propelled by the profound sense of dispossession which pervades Carrington's texts - whether in motifs of destitution in the wilderness or in confinement within the home. Carrington's women seem to inhabit the symbolic landscape suggested by Irigaray's account of women's place in the symbolic order:

From the depths of the earth to the vast expanse of heaven, time and time again [man] robs femininity of the tissue or texture of her spatiality. In exchange, though it never is one, he buys her a house, shuts her up in it, and places limits on her that are the counterpart of the place without limits where he unwittingly leaves her. He envelops her within these walls while he envelops himself and his things in her flesh.⁴⁵

The savagery of Carrington's texts represents the savage state of symbolic dereliction within which the phallogentric symbolic order holds women. However, it also reveals a violence at the foundation of the symbolic order: the sacrifice of the feminine. Carrington's narratives return to scenes which exemplify the "sacrificial relationship" (Kristeva)⁴⁶ of the symbolic order.⁴⁷ Moreover, the excesses of Carrington's feral women express a revolt against their situation:

⁴⁴ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) 2.

⁴⁵ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 170.

⁴⁶ Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 199.

⁴⁷ "If the social contract, far from being that of equal men, is based on an essentially sacrificial relationship of separation and articulation of differences which in this way produces communicable meaning, what is our place in this order of sacrifice and/or of language?" Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 199.

women are today affirming . . . that they are forced to experience this sacrificial contract against their will. Based on this, they are attempting a revolt which they see as resurrection but which society as a whole understands as murder. This attempt can lead us to a not less and sometimes more deadly violence. Or to cultural innovation. Probably to both at once. But that is precisely where the stakes are, and they are of epochal significance.⁴⁸

The urgency of this crisis is conveyed in the often catastrophic denouement to which the dynamic of Carrington's narratives is propelled; narratives which seemingly return to origins invoke an apocalyptic upheaval. The ecstatic nihilism of Carrington's transgressive heroines holds the promise of both transformation and devastation.

⁴⁸ Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 200.

PART IV

6. "Strange Country": The Impasse of History in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

With the writing of Flannery O'Connor we return to the Cold War context of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Whereas the texts of Angela Carter and Leonora Carrington were overtly concerned with issues of origin - both of identity and modernity - the suspended temporality of Plath and O'Connor seems to invoke an end of history. However, whereas Plath's narrative is held captive by an impasse of subjective memory, O'Connor's texts powerfully convey an impasse in historical memory. The oppressions and conflicts of history return from repression and register their violence in the memory in the form of trauma. Moreover, the body is the site in which the symptoms of this crisis in historical comprehension are manifested. In O'Connor's texts, bodies are possessed by history: in their repeated gestures and arrested gaze, its denials and displacements can be read.

Flannery O'Connor's writing has persistently been identified as belonging to the category of the American grotesque. O'Connor's fiction certainly belongs to the considerable American literature of unreason; recurring motifs of deformity and dismemberment, narratives compelled by a seemingly fateful dynamic and the circulation of sudden and arbitrary acts of violence in her texts seem to mark her style as profoundly illiberal and anti-humanist. When the irrational announces its presence in a text, it is often read as declaring a timelessness which is both eternal and ahistorical. Indeed, many of O'Connor's critics, taking their cue from her professed Catholicism, have sought to tame her disturbing material by finding in it

narratives of religious transcendence.¹ O'Connor's fiction is rooted in the rural backwaters of the American South where time seems to have succumbed to stasis. However, there is a powerful sense of historical context in O'Connor's writing: it ranges from the encounter with the frontier to the Cold War paranoia of its own time, and gathers within its wake the dislocations of the Civil War and both world wars. I would suggest that the devastation depicted by O'Connor's texts arises not from the wilful nihilism of the author but from a violence immanent in historical experience.

History and the irrational are revealed to exist in intimate proximity in O'Connor's texts. The catastrophes of historical experience not only confound the capacities of reason, but also haunt the present by returning through the unconscious. I would suggest that the role of history in O'Connor's narratives can be addressed by drawing an analogy between the persistence of the unresolved conflicts from the past and the return of the repressed in the uncanny. Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar"² and as that which "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light".³ The material which is subject to this mechanism of repression and return in O'Connor's fiction is history, and its violent disruptions make their imprint on the collective unconscious in the form of trauma.

¹ O'Connor is a writer whose work both compels and obscures interpretation. O'Connor shares with another modernist writer of alienation not only the ability to provoke a crisis of interpretation but also a striking similarity of motifs: abnormal experience defining the norm, the evocation of *déjà vu*, the recurrence of resemblance and the creation of strange hybrid creatures. These unnerving motifs are attributed to Kafka by Theodor Adorno, who claims that Kafka "snatches psychoanalysis from the grasp of psychology"; the same might be said of O'Connor, who similarly embarks on the shattering of identity. Adorno, "Notes on Kafka," *Prisms* (London: Spearman, 1967) 251.

² Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1985) 340.

³ Freud, "The Uncanny" 345.

History and psychoanalysis are conventionally perceived as being at odds with each other. However, as Maud Ellmann has written, they are two discourses which urgently require a language through which they can speak to each other: "What history needs is a science of tropes - that is, a psychoanalysis - to understand the ways in which the conflicts of the world are reconfigured in the conflicts of the mind."⁴ An encounter between a crisis in subjective and historical memory is theorised in the concept of trauma: a condition through which the crises of O'Connor's texts might be read. Cathy Caruth proposes a definition of trauma which is informed by Freud's theory of shock and by the testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust:

Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.⁵

According to Caruth, the quality of 'latency', which characterises Freud's understanding of the deferred symptoms of shock, also defines the 'structure of experience' constituted by trauma: "The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event."⁶ O'Connor's fiction is 'possessed' by history. The denials and displacements of history can be read in the arrested and repeated gestures and attitudes of bodies, and in the politics revealed in the dynamics of the gaze. The Holocaust registers its presence in a number of O'Connor's narratives but is most manifest in "The Displaced Person". Its memory becomes the screen on which repressed historical material is compulsively reenacted. Thus, a powerful model

⁴ Maud Ellmann, introduction, *Psychoanalytic Literary Criticism*, ed. Maud Ellmann (London: Longman, 1994) 28.

⁵ Cathy Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," *Yale French Studies 79: Literature and the Ethical Question*, ed. Claire Nouvet (Yale: Yale University Press, 1991) 181.

⁶ Cathy Caruth, introduction, *American Imago* 48:1 (1991) 3.

of history as trauma can be found in O'Connor's writing. As Caruth writes, trauma is "not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history".⁷

The Living Dead: History and the Grotesque Body

In "The Grotesque: An American Genre", William Van O'Connor suggests that the founding Enlightenment ideals of the revolutionary American constitution are belied by the darker preoccupations of its national fiction;⁸ an aspiration to neoclassical clarity is confounded by a hidden preoccupation with the irrational. In *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*, David Mogen et al suggest that the encounter with the natural world is the supreme site of this paradox:

At the heart of the indigenous frontier story was the encounter with the wilderness, an encounter which historically was violent, consuming, intrinsically metaphysical, and charged with paradox and emotional ambivalence.⁹

Indeed, Flannery O'Connor's writing seems to register this metaphysical strife in its depictions of a terroristic natural world. However, it is in the body that this ambivalence is most powerfully manifested.

The strange and estranging disorders of the body in O'Connor's texts exemplify the qualities of paradox and ambivalence which characterise the grotesque. It embodies the disconcerting contradictions which Wolfgang Kayser - informed by

⁷ Caruth, *American Imago* 48:1 (1991) 4.

⁸ "Americans identify themselves as children of the Enlightenment, with sentiments from the Romantic movement. . . . One might therefore expect Americans to have produced a literature of neoclassical clarity, warmed by a sense of human brotherhood, like the work of certain late eighteenth-century English writers." William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Carbondale: South Illinois University Press, 1962) 3.

⁹ David Mogen, Scott Sanders and Joanne Karpinski, *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature* (London: Associated Presses, 1993) 15.

the writings of Friedrich Schlegel - attributes to the grotesque form: "A clashing contrast between form and content, the unstable mixture of heterogeneous elements, the explosive force of the paradoxical, which is both ridiculous and terrifying."¹⁰ The most striking and recurrent features of the grotesque in O'Connor's fiction is the substitution of animate by inanimate qualities in the human form. The persistent and unwitting resemblance between humans and inanimate figures or automata forges a paradox which is both ridiculous and terrifying. In this uncanny motif is revealed not merely the revival of archaic beliefs but the apprehension of a crisis of subjectivity - a crisis registered through the body and induced by an encounter with modernity.

Wolfgang Kayser asserts that the most persistent "motifs of the grotesque" include "human bodies reduced to puppets, marionettes and automata, and their faces frozen into masks".¹¹ Such motifs pervade O'Connor's fiction, not least in the uncanny dissimulations of femininity. In "The Comforts of Home" (1960), Star Drake reproduces the two-dimensional allure of the burlesque mask: her "face was like a comedienne's in a musical comedy - a pointed chin, wide apple cheeks and feline empty eyes" (*Complete Stories* 384). Where Star aspires to an aspect of sparkling surprise, Mrs McIntyre, in "Good Country People" (1955), merely seems perpetually startled: a "small woman", with "red bangs", "two high orange-coloured pencilled eyebrows", and a "little doll's mouth" (CS 197).

Moreover, O'Connor's characters often share a gestural code whose motions echo the posture of Kayser's grotesque figures.¹² Their inadvertent mimicry of

¹⁰ Quoted in Wolfgang Kayser, *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, trans. Ulrich Weisstein (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 53. O'Connor's grotesque is far from the utopian idealism of Mikhail Bakhtin's carnivalesque. It inhabits the "estranged world" (Kayser 184) of the Romantic grotesque, from whose "laughter which does not laugh" Bakhtin recoils. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana Press, 1984) 45.

¹¹ Kayser 183.

¹² Walter Benjamin writes of Kafka that his "entire work constitutes a code of gestures." Benjamin, "Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1992) 117. In her essay "Writing Short Stories,"

inanimate doubles sabotages the impression of their self-possession. O'Connor's characters are repeatedly discovered in attitudes of suspension: Hazel Motes swaying in a train corridor; the Greenleaf children hanging in doorways; the child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1954) praying, her face "hung by her chin on the side of the bed, empty-minded" (CS 244). This quality of contingency is also demonstrated by 'Bevel', the misnamed child in "The River" (1953), whose giddy loss of gravity evokes his dereliction in the neglectful adult world. Simultaneously immobile and malleable, the child's body acts out a vaudevillian struggle with consciousness: "[he] seemed to be going to sleep on his feet, his head drooping farther and farther forward; he pulled it back suddenly and opened one eye; the other was stuck" (CS 169). Resemblance seems to breed imitation and an animated sequence of characters fall into predetermined patterns. The unappeasable frustration of Hazel Motes' progress in *Wise Blood* (1952), his neck "thrust forward as if he were trying to smell something that was always being drawn away" (WB 31), is reproduced in "The Displaced Person" (1954) by Astor, "leaning forward as if he were about to walk off but holding himself suspended" (CS 199), and by Greenleaf's tormentingly circuitious approach in "Greenleaf" (1956):

He walked with a high-shouldered creep and he never appeared to come directly forward. He walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle and if you wanted to look him in the face, you had to move and get in front of him. (CS 313)

This oblique relation to gravity mimics the marionette - whose limbs are suspended from the neck - and suggests a tenuous grasp on bodily autonomy. Thus, the characteristic gait of the human automaton - the head thrust awkwardly forward, the body drawn abjectly behind in its wake - is a parody of the Cartesian

O'Connor uses Kafka's "rearrangements of nature" in "Metamorphosis" to illustrate the conjunction of naturalism and fantasy which characterises her chosen form of realism. O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) 98.

sovereignty of the rational mind. The mind and head are elided and the lofty transcendence of thought translated into the brute authority of the brain.

The effect of such figures is to provoke an ambivalent dread; they render the human frame an empty shell, void of interiority and vulnerable to alien possession. The aptly named Pointer's apparent loss of autonomy in "Good Country People," is employed in a comic, rather hapless pantomime: "under cover of a pant, he fell forward into her hall. It was rather as if the suitcase had moved first, jerking him after it" (CS 277). However, in "The Lane Shall Enter First" (1962), Norton, in thrall to Rufus's commands, appears to succumb to a more sinister hypnotic abandon: he "jumped up and followed him as if the boy had yanked an invisible leash" (CS 466). Such a demonstration of uncannily displaced movement evokes an archaic belief in the "omnipotence of thoughts" - one source of the uncanny, according to Freud, being the revival of unsurmounted 'primitive' beliefs.¹³ Mrs Connin has the capacity to exert a kind of telepathic restraint over her mischievous children in "A Circle in The Fire" (1954):

Something seemed to have happened to them. They stared over [Bevel's] head as if they saw something coming behind him but he was afraid to turn his own head and look. Their speckles were pale and their eyes still and gray as glass. Only their ears twitched silently. (CS 161)

In "Greenleaf," Mr Greenleaf registers a fiercely passive dissent by adopting the demeanour of one possessed. He "throws" himself into his car seat and "flings" himself against the gate, as if against his own will: "He seemed to throw himself forward at each step and then pull back as if he were calling on some power to witness that he was being forced" (CS 331). However, in "The Displaced Person," Mrs Shortley's experience of a form of uninvited possession compels her to speak like an oracle but to move with the careful precision of an automaton: "woodenly she planted one foot in front of the other" (CS 210). An even more malign and alienating possession leaves Thomas's hands bereft in "The Comforts

¹³ See Freud, "The Uncanny" 370.

of Home", "hanging helplessly at the wrists" (CS 403), in the wake of murder; they recall the clownish giant hands of the "poorly made automaton", Homer Simpson, in Nathanael West's *The Day of the Locust*, whose clumsy actions similarly generate a murderous fury.¹⁴ Finally, at the revival in "The River", the crowd's collective actions have the passivity of clockwork:

A fluttering figure had begun to move forward with a kind of butterfly movement - an old woman with flapping arms whose head wobbled as if it might fall off any second. . . . still flapping, she turned a time or two in a blind circle until someone reached out and pulled her back into the group. (CS 166)

When a crowd assembles in O'Connor's fiction it does not form the popular body triumphant so much as succumb to the baleful unanimity of the mob. An ominous potential is evident which will be realised through the appalling logic of "The Displaced Person."

The ridiculous offers much comic potential in O'Connor's fiction. For example, in "A View of the Woods" (1957), the swiftness of Tilman's reflex is such that it seems to exceed the scope of his own autonomy and results in pure comic choreography: he "disappeared completely under the counter as if he had been snatched by the feet from below" (CS 352). However, the sadistic undercurrent of such humour generates unease. Elizabeth Sewell poses an unexpected but insightful parallel in her essay "Is Flannery O'Connor a Nonesense Writer?". Sewell is well aware of this genre's associations with whimsy and infantilism. However, by comparing O'Connor with Jonathan Swift, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, Sewell astutely notes that the "astonishingly high proportion of violence"¹⁵ in O'Connor's narratives far from forfeits a place in this tradition: "Appeal to intellect and not emotion is a defining characteristic of Nonesense as well as comedy. It is what makes violence admissable in both

¹⁴ Nathanael West, *Complete Works* (London: Picador, 1988) 89.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Sewell, "Is Flannery O'Connor a Nonesense Writer?," *Soundings* 73: 2-3 (1990) 281.

genres".¹⁶ Indeed, the substitution of inanimate for animate qualities in the body commits a certain violence against the human form.¹⁷ Moreover, it assaults human autonomy and sovereignty.

Sheldon Currie reads this resemblance through Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Comic*. Bergson asserts that "the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine".¹⁸ Currie suggests that O'Connor's fiction enacts a comic struggle between body and spirit which affirms 'our' sense of what constitutes human identity: a person with a wooden leg "appears to be a puppet, a robot, a mechanical thing, whereas we know the person, by definition, to be a spirit".¹⁹ However, the ambivalence of unwitting resemblance draws its power from putting into jeopardy our very sense of human sovereignty.

The disordered form of the grotesque carries omens of violence and death and invokes estrangement - effects which are symptoms of the uncanny. The "puppets, marionettes and automata"²⁰ which define Kayser's grotesque are equally motifs of the uncanny: Freud includes in his category of the uncanny the "impression made by waxwork figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata".²¹ Freud's essay takes as its literary model of the uncanny E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman," a narrative occupied by the enigmatic doll Olympia. "What are we expected to do", asks Hélène Cixous, "with these puppets which have haunted the stages of German Romanticism?".²² So contagious is this haunting that Cixous likens the scene of Freud's own essay to a "puppet theatre in

¹⁶ Sewell 278.

¹⁷ Sewell also remarks upon a "dis-construction" of the natural form. Sewell 284.

¹⁸ Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Comic*, trans. Cloudsley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (New York: Macmillan, 1914) 29.

¹⁹ Sheldon Currie, "Freaks and Folks: Comic Imagery in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor," *Antigonish Review* 62: 3 (1985) 134-5.

²⁰ Kayser 183.

²¹ Freud, "The Uncanny" 347.

²² Hélène Cixous, "Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's 'Das Unheimlich'," *New Literary History* Spring (1985) 538.

which real dolls or fake dolls, real and simulated life, are manipulated by a sovereign but capricious stage-setter".²³ The power of the uncanny is such because the spell exerted by such figures has yet to be discharged. Freud's puppet theatre invokes a world of enchantment translated and transformed, in Allon White's phrase, by Romanticism's 'carnival of the night': "In the process of being internalised, of being driven in upon the interior darkness of the individual unconscious, they [carnival motifs] became largely negative elements, often indistinguishable from nightmare and sickness."²⁴ Curiously, O'Connor's landscapes impart intimations of such estranged enchantment; her strictly unsentimental depiction of poverty and hardship is shadowed by portents of the irrational.

Moonlight is a medium of tantalising enchantment in "Greenleaf," "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," and "The Artificial Nigger." In "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the "silver" pond, "speckled sky" and the "long finger of light" reaching from the fair are traced by moonlight. They invoke the child's waking fantasy of the "gold sawdust light" and "diamond ring" of the showground (CS 242). Her dream of martyrdom, however, has a farcical quality and, similarly, in "Greenleaf," the moonlight casts the opening scene into a mockingly chivalric form: the silver, crowned bull in "Greenleaf", seems to be aping the divine metamorphic courtships of classical deities. In "The Artificial Nigger" (1955), a "miraculous moonlight" (CS 249) embellishes the mean furnishings of Mr Head's shack with a spectral silver and brocade, while the moon itself is caught in an attitude of obeisance in the mirror. In a parody of feudal attendance, the chair stands "stiff and attentive" and his trousers adopt a "noble air" (CS 249). The profane slop jar is transfigured into a "snow white" purity and stands guard over Nelson like a "small personal angel" (CS 250). On their return from the city, the

²³ Cixous, "Fiction and its Phantoms" 525.

²⁴ Allon White, "Pigs and Pierrots: The Politics of Transgression in Modern Fiction," *Raritan* 2:2 (1982) 61.

"full splendour" of moonlight again attends Nelson and Mr Head, gilding the sage grass silver and hanging the sky with clouds "illuminated like lanterns" (CS 269). The otherworldly quality of the moonlit landscape acquires the otherness of Eastern exoticism in "The Enduring Chill" (1958), where the "white gold sun" is like a "strange potentate" (CS 357), and in "The Displaced Person" the "glittering" (CS 194) peacock makes a startling contrast with the profound poverty of the land and its people.

The enchanted landscape seems to proffer, almost cruelly, riches beyond the aspiration of its dwellers. Fairy tale motifs suggest subtextual narratives of wish-fulfilment. In "The Displaced Person", Mrs Shortley's limited attempts to imagine the arriving Polish refugees initially falls into story-book images: they become "three bears, walking single file, with wooden shoes on like Dutchmen and sailor hats and bright coats with a lot of buttons" (CS 195). The centrality of the porridge pot in the Goldilocks story illustrates the strong oral dynamic of the fairy tale, and the symbolic importance of the magically overflowing cooking pot in the collective imagination of popular folklore. Indeed, in "A Circle in the Fire", Powell's return to the remembered paradise of Mrs Hopewell's farm has the aspect of a fantastic quest: the "glazed pink" (CS 184-5) water tower and the sage grass, green as glass, evoke the candied gingerbread house to which hungry children turn from the perilous wilderness of parental abandon. Effectively dispossessed of the land and living in urban squalor with a stepfather - the traditional usurper of the dead parent - Powell accords with a number of conventions for the child protagonist of a fairy tale.

However, these vivid glimpses of enchantment generally evoke the trials and terrors of the fairy tale *without* the consolation of a felicitous solution; the sublime landscape becomes terroristic. Dark and wild woods are traditionally the site of peril and fear and, in "A View of the Woods" (1957), they appear to "walk across the water" (CS 335). The uncanny animation of the creeping forest is also at work in "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" (1953): the trees are "tall and dark and

deep" (CS 125) and ominously 'gape' like a "dark open mouth" (CS 127), ready to receive the violent deaths of the grandmother's family. Similarly, in "The River," Bevel enters woodlands "as if he were entering a strange country" (CS 164) and glimpses a disembodied gaze - "two frozen green-gold eyes enclosed in the darkness of a tree hole" (CS 164) - which implicitly threaten to engulf him also. The supernatural quality of the green world easily slides into malevolence, especially when transplanted into the urban wasteland: in "A Stroke of Good Fortune" (1949), the green and black clad Mr Jerger, with his goatish appearance, suggestion of mildew and pungent "whiff" (CS 101), has demonic resonances. Other crooked figures, such as the one-armed Mr Shiftlet, who forms a "crooked cross" (CS 146) in the sunset, and Rufus, who is silhouetted by lightening in a doorway like an "irate drenched crow" (CS 453), attract an irrational suspicion. Star Drake, who gives the impression of being "physically crooked" (CS 388), haunts her benefactors with a "shrill depthless laugh" (CS 388) which acquires a tormenting agency of its own: "bodiless but real, [it] bounded up the street as if it were about to jump in the open side of the car and ride away with him [Thomas]" (CS 392). Moreover, the "sway-backed" Mr Guizac and his wife "shaped like a peanut" (CS 195) are assumed to embody the "crooked ways" (206) of Europe which are so superstitiously feared by Mrs Shortley in "The Displaced Person".

The unwitting entry into the 'strange country', announces the presence of death - a presence which is oppressively insistent in O'Connor's fiction. The uncanny quality of mortification in the grotesque figure inadvertently mimics the rigor mortis of the corpse. Even a potentially charming resemblance to the puppet's suspension from its neck bears a lugubrious reminder of the gallows. Freud assigns the fullest manifestation of the uncanny to death and its returns: "Many people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in the highest degree in relation to

death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts."²⁵ Such returns recur throughout O'Connor's fiction in the motif of the living dead - a motif which is suggestive of encounters with the suppressed past.

Mrs Connin's unwittingly inanimate appearance in "The River" affirms a deathly association: she resembles a corpse. A "speckled skeleton in a long pea-green coat and felt helmet" (CS 157), in repose she evokes the dark festivity of the *danse macabre*: "her mouth fell open to show a few long scattered teeth, some gold and some darker than her face; she began to whistle and blow like a musical skeleton" (CS 160). Chancey Shortley's curious courtship of his wife, in "The Displaced Person," involves a humorous imitation of a "paralysed man propped up to enjoy a cigarette" (CS 200). His waggish immobility sets the scene for a mock resurrection: "risen straight up in bed like Lazarus from the tomb" (CS 208). Where Chancey Shortley mimics the living dead, the General's tenuous grasp on life, in "A Late Encounter With The Enemy" (1953), seems to unnaturally defeat the grave: his dessicated remains are exhibited in a museum like a living relic. He is "bundled up and lent to the Capitol City Museum where he was displayed from one to four in a musty room full of old photographs, old uniforms, old artillery and historic documents" (CS 139). He is roped off from the public and only slight movements of his eyes indicate that he is still alive.

O'Connor's characters also inflict a form of self-mortification upon themselves as an expression of perverse self-assertion. Thus, Julian walks "with his hands in his pockets, his head down and thrust forward and his eyes glazed with the determination to make himself completely numb" ("Everything That Rises Must Converge," CS 406), and Asbury bears a "wooden resigned expression" ("The Enduring Chill," CS 358). Both mimic attitudes of mortal rigidity to convey a punitive disavowal of their mothers; they seek to evade the bonds of obligation by spurning the gift of life. Similarly, Nelson moves "mechanically" ("The Artificial

²⁵ Freud, "The Uncanny" 364.

Nigger," CS 265), rendering his face "bloodless" and his eyes "triumphantly cold" (CS 268), in order to return to his grandfather the mortification of denial which he has suffered. Negotiating with her powerlessness as a child, Mary Fortune mutinously negates herself to the point that Pitts "might have been chauffeuring a small dead body" ("A View From the Woods," CS 351). Finally, in "Judgement Day", Tanner's desire to return to his origins is a barely coded yearning for a departure from life; he fantasises about traversing this boundary by being committed alive to a coffin. His desire to arrive in the town of his birth, whether dead or alive, places him in a liminal position between life and death and he rebukes his daughter with the ghastly authority of the undead: "his eyes were trained on her like the eyes of an angry corpse" (CS 533).

The ambivalence of the grotesque motif of the living dead is most disturbingly embodied in figures which have succumbed to the deadly inertia of the automata. The ambivalence of the encounter with the repressed past is here compounded by a traumatic apprehension of modernity.

The resemblance between the human form and automata questions the autonomy of human animation. Moreover, the grafting of mechanical appendages onto the human body in O'Connor's fiction suggests a visceral violence. The monstrous hybrid which is the product of this conjunction graphically embodies the dread of absorption of the human body by machinery: the exchange of "human vitality" for "deathly facticity" in which the human assumes the inertia of the inanimate.²⁶ The morbid fascination which the concept of an iron lung exerts over Mrs Pritchard in "Good Country People" is compelling in its suggestion of both invasion and imprisonment of the human form by a monstrous inhuman growth. Furthermore, by wilfully affecting the artificiality of her leg throughout her whole body, Joy/Hulga renders herself a hollow fortress. Her self-naming affirms this transformation as her mother imagines her name in

²⁶ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993) 129.

the contours of the "broad blank hull of a battleship" (CS 274). The route by which Tanner seeks to traverse the border between life and death in "Judgement Day" is the railroad; the closed carriage of the train mimics the coffin which will carry him over the final threshold. Indeed, the industrial world of modern capitalism offers many scenes of the uncanny in O'Connor's fiction.

The reactionary rural setting of O'Connor's narratives offers a belated resistance to the 'event' of modernity which has long since passed. The supreme site of modernity - the city - accrues an almost mythical status.²⁷ It seems impossibly removed from the rural backwaters of her fiction, and yet the alienating effects of automation seep through its figures in an uncanny contagion. Julian's mother's intransigent opinions on racial equality are characterised, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961), by the driving rigidity of a track bound train. Moreover, Mrs Freeman's whole facial demeanour mimics the lumbering implacability of her thoughts, which are "steady and driving like the advance of a heavy truck" (CS 271). Her manner is devoid of the spontaneity and fluidity of human interaction and shamelessly betrays its inner mechanism: at the possibility of defeat, she executes a mental three-point turn, her expression coming to a "complete stop" then after an almost "imperceptible movement", "receding" to the point that she is effectively "no longer there in spirit" (CS 271).

The mechanical extinction of human personality renders the human form rigid to the point of mortification. Hal Foster proposes that the role of the automata in the uncanny is far from incidental. He traces a parallel history of the uncanny and of the machine by remarking upon the archaic fears revived by the emergence of modern forms:

The machine and the commodity were long seen as infernal forces (Marx often draws on this folk language to describe capital in general as

²⁷ "In Kafka, an entire lifetime is not enough to reach the next town . . ." Adorno, *Prisms* 255.

vampirish). But the very nature of the machine and the commodity is also demonic, for both evoke an uncanny confusion between life and death.²⁸

Estrangement in the nineteenth century becomes alienation from the disenchanted world of the twentieth century. Foster speculates: "might not the very apperception of the uncanny . . . depend on the historical development of reification, of the the ghostly doubling of the human by the mechanical-commodified, by *the thing*?"²⁹ Hence, Freud's uncanny carries its own history: it preserves traces of its origins in German Romanticism *and* attests to the alienated disenchantment of the modernity within which it is articulated.

The conjunction of animate and inanimate shatters the bodily integrity of the human form. Indeed, O'Connor's fiction is marked by a recurrence of artificial and amputated limbs. The disembodied shoe or foot makes sly intrusions into O'Connor's fiction, sometimes illicitly drawing attention to the margins of the narrative and at other times perversely occupying centre stage. The Girl Scout Oxfords sported by the "ugly girl" (CS 490) in "Revelation" (1964), by Mary George in "The Enduring Chill," and by Sally Poker Sash in "A Late Encounter With The Enemy," are the mark of the female intellectual. Their inappropriately juvenile character mocks the gravity of their wearers and their practical ugliness implicitly disputes the femininity of their owners. Where hats are associated with aspiration, shoes betray inescapably base origins. The public humiliation which ensues from Sally's accidental pairing of an evening dress and her sensible shoes, in "A Late Encounter With the Enemy," has the structure of a Freudian slip; the compulsive return to this scene in her thoughts and dreams reinforces the sense of a repressed anxiety inadvertently betrayed.

Shoes function as an indication of origin in "Revelation," in which they are employed by Mrs Turpin in her obsessive categorisation: the modesty of her own black pumps is irreproachable, while the "bedroom slippers" of the "white-trashy

²⁸ Foster 126.

²⁹ Foster 129.

mother" are predictably damning (CS 491). When Greenleaf addresses his foot in Mrs May's presence it betrays an impulse to reduce his employer to the degradation of dirt. Similarly, the Misfit unconsciously acts out the fate of the grandmother's family by digging a hole with his foot then covering it with a motion of burial. Thus, the foot is most malign when it becomes the harbinger of violence. A pair of feet are surreally "planted" (CS 410) on the bus in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" in coded anticipation of Julian's mother's loss of sense, and in "Parker's Back" (1965), the protagonist flees the site of an accident marked by his father-in-law's burning shoes: "He was not in them" (CS 520).

Freud includes in his category of the uncanny, motifs of bodily fragmentation which might be traced to the macabre humour of the fairy tale: "Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist . . . feet which dance by themselves . . . all these have something peculiarly uncanny about them."³⁰ In O'Connor's narratives, these phantom limbs are like doubles which haunt and avenge; they compound the sense of loss - of being bereft and dispossessed - which pervades her fiction. Elizabeth Grosz writes that the phantom limb is "an expression of nostalgia for the unity and wholeness of the body, its completion. It is a memorial to the missing limb, a psychical delegate that stands in its place."³¹ Moreover, these alienated parts are strongly suggestive of a severing and dismembering of the human form on a scale only achievable by war or mass industry.

In "The Lame Shall Enter First," description slides from innocuous similitude to the suggestion of monstrous accretions or even mechanisms of torment: "Artificial limbs were stacked on the shelves, legs and arms and hands, claws and hooks, straps and human harnesses and unidentifiable instruments for unnamed

³⁰ Freud, "The Uncanny" 366.

³¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1994) 73.

deformities" (CS 469). Joy's leg exerts an irresistible fascination for Mrs Freeman and, similarly, Rufus' club foot has the power to draw and transfix the unwilling gaze. The motif of the dismembered or deformed limb emerges with an uncanny regularity, harbouring unarticulated dread and desire. Rufus's "monstrous club foot" (CS 450) evokes the figure of Oedipus. A "sacred object" (CS 459) to its owner, it becomes fetishised by Sheppard as both seductive and repulsive. The "black deformed mass swell[s]" before his eyes but when uncovered provokes disgust: the clerk removes the old shoe "as if he were skinning an animal still half alive" (CS 470). The foot transgresses the borders which guard the dignity of the human form, slipping on one side into formless materiality and the other into the clinical austerity of a mechanical supplement: Rufus's new shoe is a "black slick shapeless object, shining hideously. It looked like a blunt weapon, highly polished" (CS 470). The hapless foot is infused with projected anxieties and is thoroughly Freudian in its evocation of decapitation: an "empty sock protruded like a grey tongue from a severed head" (CS 450).

In the grotesque body is registered a modern crisis of subjectivity - a crisis prompted by an anxiety about the status of the body but which can only express itself through the unconscious gestural language of the body. The conjunction of animate and inanimate qualities invokes an ambivalence which functions on two planes. The human form may unwittingly affect the rigidity of an automata and the rigor mortis of the corpse encoded within it. However, it may also slide into ambiguous association with animal life.

The spell of the former attends repetition, doubling and the proliferation of masks of identity which threaten to displace cherished human individuality. The unwitting capacity to resemble one's own representation evokes a vertiginous anxiety about authenticity and a dread of usurpation. Thus arises the motif of the uncanny double: the unfathomable alienation upon meeting one's own face in the possession of an other. O'Connor's texts are punctuated by a series of doubles: Julian's mother's conviction that "I at least won't meet myself coming and

going'" (CS 406) almost inevitably summons up a doppelgänger. The twins, O.T and E.T Greenleaf, embody the monstrous hybrid of "'one man in two skins'" (CS 326). The pairing of Nelson and Head, and Mary and Pitts, suggest an uneasy relation of appropriation; the elder partner attempts to claim the younger as his own but experiences a loss of control. Mary's face is a "small replica of the old man's" (CS 336), but in their violent and fatal confrontation Pitts sees his "own face coming to bite him" (CS 355). Head's "youthful expression in daylight" contrasts with Nelson's "ancient" look (CS 251), but they also appear as "an ancient child" and a "miniature old man" (CS 269), sharing preternatural gravity: their self-reflexivity fuels a bitter battle of will. The doubling of the black and white characters, Coleman and Tanner, in "Judgement Day" (1965), illustrates a denied relation of dependence and exploitation based on race as does that of Julian's mother and the black mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge". Similarly, the doubling of Mrs Cope and Mrs Pritchard, and of Mrs Freeman and Mrs McIntyre, renders the actions of hired labour uncanny: Mrs Cope's commands are mediated through Mrs Pritchard in a form of ventriloquism and Mrs Shortley unconsciously mimics Mrs McIntyre as if she inhabited the same body.

However, the dissolution of distinction between animal and human existence - which informs the other plane of the grotesque - attends the failure to be sufficiently upright, conscious and rational. The over-determined quality of the automaton can be read as a compensatory mechanism compelled by a dread of collapse into undifferentiated materiality.

The fusion of human and animal characteristics in O'Connor's fiction casts an uncanny unease which Freud attributes to the revival of anachronistic beliefs. The blurring of boundaries between humans and animals betrays a residue of an archaic belief in animism. In "The River," Bevel is swiftly disabused of the sentimental anthropomorphism which is a diluted survival of animism - the story-book expectation of pigs as "small fat pink animals with curly tails and round

grinning faces and bow ties" (CS 161). Indeed, humans rarely provide benign models for the animal world to emulate; the conflation of humans with animals has only sinister overtones. Mr Paradise's resemblance to a "giant pig" (CS 174) in "The River," despite his evidently benign intentions, follows a Biblical reference to demons cast into pigs. Nelson is reduced to absolute instinctual terror, in "The Artificial Nigger," and gallops like a "wild maddened pony" (CS 264) but it is his punitive grandfather, Mr Head, who has inflicted such a forceful metamorphosis. Similarly, Parker's self-inscription through his ever elaborating tattoos, in "Parker's Back," threatens usurpation by internal insurrection: "as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare" (CS 514).

The proximity of human and animal categories produces an anxiety which is expressed more as a fear of regression than of possession; even in the latter part of the 20th century, the Southern landscape of O'Connor's writing is perhaps more alive to Darwinian controversy than most. Such an anxiety is comically depicted in Enoch's unilateral warfare with the animal kingdom in *Wise Blood*.

Enoch is described as having the unwelcome ingratiation of a "friendly hound dog with light mange" (WB 38). In one short story version of the novel, Enoch is pursued by a curious grievance provoked by the creatures in the park: "Every animal there had a personal haughty hatred for him like society people have for climbers" ("The Heart of the Park" (1952), CS 90) - the human being is a social climber on the evolutionary ladder and Enoch himself a rather tardy *arriviste*. He suffers an unexplained indignity in sharing his rented room with the portrait of a smug moose and takes his revenge by removing the unwitting animal's frame, implicitly inflicting the humiliation of nudity. Enoch's greatest spite is reserved for his closer evolutionary relation - the ape - whose apparent ubiquity in contemporary popular culture is perceived as a persistent insult. To endure a movie featuring a heroic baboon called Lonnie is "more than Enoch could stand" (WB 133): he flees in indignation. The appearance of a fellow simian celebrity,

Gonga the gorilla, is "an opportunity to insult a successful ape" straight from the "hand of Providence" (WB 172). However, in "Judgement Day," a racially freighted subtext attends Coleman and Tanner's resemblance to a bear and a monkey; that this similarity is reversed in old age conveys the parasitic quality of dependence on black labour. However, the description reserved for Coleman evokes a Social Darwinian revulsion: "a stinking skin full of bones, arranged in what seemed vaguely human form" (CS 534).

It is notable that animistic resemblance is most sinister when transplanted to the city. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes encounters a veritable menagerie, heralded on his approach by three women "dressed like parrots" (WB 9) and confirmed by his confrontation with Asa Hawkes who has the aspect of a "grinning mandrill" (WB 33). The depiction of the city as animal house is symptomatic of the crisis which the urban jungle induces in the rural exiles of O'Connor's fiction.

Animals in captivity exert a terrible pathos, all the more so because it is these creatures which betray a human resemblance. In "Good Country People," Joy herself experiences the degradation of being subject to the morbid stare when Pointer "gaz[es] at her with open curiosity, with fascination, like a child watching a new fantastic animal at the zoo" (CS 283). In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the family leave Red Sammy's diner to be confronted by an ironic imitation of their own meal: a monkey in a tree eating its own fleas. Furthermore, the unnaturally static quality of zoo animals in *Wise Blood* has a morose tone of abandon. Black bears sit like "two matrons having tea, their faces polite and self-absorbed" (WB 87). Their incarceration seems implicitly punitive and they are confined in a "long set of steel cages like Alcatraz Penitentiary in the movies" (WB 76). The exotic thrill of captive wild beasts is lost in their dejection; barbarity seems to belong only to their captors. Indeed, the two 'enemies' - the hawk and the bear - which are kept in one cage for the Roman style amusement of those passing through a service station, make a doleful exhibit: "most of the hawk's tail was gone; the bear had only one eye" (WB 119). However, for

grotesque disorganisation of the natural form and utter dejection, the abject owl of *Wise Blood* cannot be matched. The gradual revelation of O'Connor's description of an "empty cage" conveys a deep sense of the uncanny:

Over in one corner on the floor of the cage, there was an eye. The eye was in the middle of something that looked like a piece of mop sitting on an old rag. He squinted close to the wire and saw that the piece of mop was an owl with one eye open. It was looking directly at Hazel Motes. (WB 89)

The uncanny is associated with forbidden vision: the sudden revelation of that which "ought to have remained hidden but has come to light" (Freud).³² It is through the gaze that a discrepancy between perception and understanding generates ambivalence.³³ However, the gaze assumes a malign power in O'Connor's fiction: it is fixed less in enlightened revelation than in wilful blindness. Moreover, the gaze becomes the opaque screen on which the politics of a repressed history is enacted. The historical significance of the grotesque is revealed in the racially coded dynamics of the gaze.

Mask and Masquerade: The Politics of the Gaze

Metaphors of the specular pervade O'Connor's fiction. However, O'Connor's metaphors function as a critique of the Enlightenment association between the supreme lucidity of perception and understanding. Martin Jay has written of the privileged role attributed to sight: "Long accounted the 'noblest' of the senses, sight traditionally enjoyed a privileged role as the most discriminating and

³² Freud, "The Uncanny" 345.

³³ E.T.A Hoffman's "The Sandman," the subject of Freud's essay on the uncanny, features fantastic ocular instruments which abet obsession and delusion.

trustworthy of the sensual mediators between man and world."³⁴ Yet in O'Connor's fiction, the world is not characterised by transparent legibility nor are the eyes the windows of the soul - vision is obscured by wilful opacity. In the shadowy reverse of enlightened rationality are found its Gothic nightmares: "the fear of being watched by an omniscient God or followed by the evil eye shows how highly ambiguous the role of sight has been, especially when it includes the experience of being the object instead of the subject of the look" (Jay).³⁵ The "face frozen into a mask" (Kayser)³⁶ is a further assault on humanist sensibilities, in whose terms the expressive eyes are the crowning glory of the face.

The "most *readable* space of the body" (Doane),³⁷ the face is the throne of rationality and individuality. However, O'Connor's characters exhibit a wilful blindness; their broad and blank faces are indifferent to dazzling landscapes and skies. Mrs Shortley's "unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock's tail" (CS 200), in "The Displaced Person," are implicitly rebuked by the superfluity of symbolic vision captured in the tail "full of fierce planets with eyes" like a "map of the universe" (CS 200). Furthermore, faces are obscured in O'Connor's narratives by spectacles - another grotesquely inanimate appendage - which indicate their wearers' impenetrable introversion. The "big spectacled" (CS 275) Joy, in "Good Country People", is typical in that the frames which should correct a deficiency only exacerbate the effect of her withdrawal:

The large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it. (CS 273)

³⁴ Martin Jay, "In The Empire of the Gaze: Foucault and the Denigration of Vision in the 20th Century," *Postmodernism*, ed. Lisa Appignanesi (London: Free Association Books, 1989) 50.

³⁵ Jay 51.

³⁶ Kayser 183.

³⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991) 47.

Similarly, in "A View of the Woods," Mary Fortune's spectacles have a regressive effect and the origin of her gaze elusively recedes into oblivion. Like the visually impaired Lucynell Crater, who peers through a "triangular door she had made in her overturned hair" (CS 149), Mary also places a veil between herself and the world: her bobbed hair forms a "kind of door" (CS 339) and her face becomes a "little red mirror framed in a door of fine hair" (CS 349). Pitts' appropriation of her opacity as a mirror in which to find self-reflecting images only affirms her severe solipsism: his "verbal tilts" with her are a "sport like putting a mirror up in front of a rooster and watching him fight his reflection" (CS 341). Stubborn and subversive resistance is met in the pursuit of mirror-images. Sheppard seeks to find his better self in the object of his relentless compassion but Rufus's eyes are "like distorting mirrors in which he saw himself made hideous and grotesque" (CS 474). In "The Artificial Nigger," the panoramic revelation of the city is obstructed by its very medium which persists in returning unflattering self-images: a "pale ghost-like face scowling at him" (CS 253).

Where sight is not opaque, it is privileged with a supernatural and almost violent quality of penetration: the gaze becomes a malevolent and uncanny weapon. In "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," a spotlight dismembers Sally into a "weird moon-shaped slice" (CS 138) and the General is immortalised in a static posture - "immovable in the exact centre of the spotlight, his neck thrust forward, his mouth slightly open" (CS 138) - which anticipates the seizure of death. Similarly, in "The Enduring Chill," Asbury squirms "helplessly as if he were pinned to the bed by the terrible eye" (CS 377) and in "The Lame Shall Enter First," Rufus's look impales Norton: it "went through the child like a pin and paralysed him" (CS 453). The fear of a disembodied, omniscient eye is exploited in a movie watched by Enoch, in *Wise Blood*: a scientist named "The Eye" conducts operations by remote control. The dread of illicit intervention and visual violation is similarly suffered by Thomas in "The Comforts of Home" when he recoils from Star's "long familiar sparkling stare" (CS 389) which has a tactile

effect as if it "might have been her hands" (CS 390). In "The Displaced Person", Mrs Shortley's prejudiced and predatory gaze effectively renders the Guizacs dead from the outset: "Her look first grazed the tops of the displaced people's heads and then revolved downwards slowly, the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air until it alights on the carcass" (CS 197). The invasive power of the look is most didactically expounded in "The Lamé Shall Enter First," where it is employed by Sheppard in the service of enlightenment. Using metaphors of space exploration to demonstrate his faith in the civilising expansion of the empire of the gaze, Sheppard's goal is for Rufus to "*see* the universe, to see that the darkest parts of it could be penetrated" (CS 451). His mission is to pluck Rufus from the darkness of his ignorance and his poverty: his glimpse of Rufus vanishing, "with the swiftness of a rat" (CS 452), into a gloomy city alleyway evokes Social Darwinian anxieties of regression. However, Sheppard's metaphors accrue punitive overtones in his desire to "pierce the child's conscience with his gaze" (CS 446): when he imagines Rufus "braced against the light that was ravaging him" (CS 451), this language of force and violation anticipates the unfounded accusation of sexual abuse to be brought against him. Similarly, in "A Circle in the Fire," a silent battle is engaged through the claims of vision. Mrs Cope is besieged by the boys' invulnerable "white penetrating stares" (CS 179) and Powell's gaze, mediated through spectacles and a cast, employs a pincer movement by "coming from two directions at once as if it had them surrounded" (CS 179). Mrs Cope's spectacles have the effect of reversing perspective so that her eyes seem to be "enlarging all the time behind her glasses as if she were continually being astonished" (CS 175). She appears to be attempting to incorporate her lands from the marauding threat of the city boys and her eyes look "as if they would keep on enlarging until they turned her wrongside-out" (CS 177). However, Powell's eyes return a cold voracity which, by "trying to enclose the whole place in one encircling stare" (CS 181), seeks to contest her claim to the land. Ultimately, Mrs Cope is stripped by their specular audacity and exhibits a

"shocked look as if she had had a searchlight thrown on her in the middle of the night" (CS 186).

The historical specificity of the grotesque and the politics of the specular meet in the racially coded dynamics of the gaze. The grotesque body becomes the stylised and alienating stage on which a masquerade of racial identity is played out.

The masquerade of 'minstrelsy' is not far removed from the exaggerated language of gesture in O'Connor's parodic comedy. Some critics have suggested that O'Connor is complicit in 'minstrelsy's' offensive reduction of black identity to the clownish grimaces of a mask, constructed through the white gaze. Claire Kahane asserts that in O'Connor's "play with the blackface mask" the "mask has hardened" and is "usually inseparable from the face, a necessary consequence of her inability to portray Negroes from the inside."³⁸ However, I would suggest that in O'Connor's texts the 'mask' is a site where the construction of the 'other' is contested. The mask becomes the parodic image of white prejudice and a strategic weapon of dissimulation employed by otherwise disempowered black characters.³⁹

Despite being confined to reactive roles, the presence of black characters in O'Connor's fiction is nevertheless crucial. Their agency as individuals is rarely privileged but their repressed place in history is crucially determining. The paradox of ubiquity and invisibility is evident in the ruthlessly abstract logic of racism expressed in "The Artificial Nigger". Just as anti-semitism notoriously thrives in the absence of Jews, so in this narrative a most strident proponent of racism originates from a region where it is mordantly boasted that the last

³⁸ Claire Kahane, "The Artificial Niggers," *Massachusetts Review* 19 (1978) 186-7.

³⁹ The significance of the motif of the mask in O'Connor's fiction, affirms Ralph Ellison's assertion that "the mask was an inseparable part of the national iconography." Ellison, "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke," *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1953) 48.

"nigger" was "run out" twelve years previously (CS 252). Segregation is based on visible absence and a number of O'Connor's narratives take place on symbolic sites of the Civil Rights struggle. Julian's mother's superficially cryptic remark - "'I see we have the bus to ourselves'" (CS 410) - is all too eloquent in its particular context. The conviction expressed in "Revelation," that "'they ought to send all them niggers back to Africa'" (CS 495) is an even more forcible effort of negation. It could be argued that in O'Connor's texts the black labour on which the white South grounds its wealth makes itself manifest in a phantom return from repression - in the form of the physical amplitude of emancipated urban blacks. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the professional is a "large Negro" (CS 412) and the mother a "giant of a woman" (CS 415), while the passenger in "The Artificial Nigger" is a "huge coffee-coloured man" (CS 254); their corporeal abundance and sartorial flair implicitly rebukes the paucity of white bodies, especially those of the rural poor. The "tremendous Negro" (CS 256) in "The Artificial Nigger" makes a "deliberate" progress (CS 255) through the train which seems expressive of a defensive dignity but also has an almost regal splendour. His belly "rode majestically under his buttoned coat" (CS 254) like that of Doctor Foley which is "a throne for his gold watch and chain" (CS 535). Moreover, his sapphire ring captures and miniaturises Mr Head in its reflection. Envy and contempt are certainly evident in these descriptions but it could also be claimed that their expansive figures make a compensatory register of the true proportions of black history.

Nevertheless, the masquerade of racial identity as staged by whites signifies an attempt to efface or even negate black agency. A dependence on artifice to represent and enforce racial oppression is the subtext of "The Artificial Nigger," with its succession of iconic representations. Nelson and Mr Head pause at a shoe-shine station in the city as if paying homage to a monument to white supremacy. The superfluity of representation symbolised by the plaster cast 'negro' only reinforces their assumptions. The mass of unrepresented subjectivity

which this construction denies *is* glimpsed, by a child, in an exceptional moment of still interiority in "The River": "Across the street at the Empire Hotel, a coloured cleaning woman was looking down from an upper window, resting her face on her folded arms" (CS 171). The woman's thoughts are withheld, or rather, O'Connor declines to enter into her subjectivity. O'Connor's refusal to assume the perspective of a black character has been read as a failure or, more seriously, an inability to attribute consciousness to her black characters. However, a stance of some ethical interest could be read in this refusal. By depicting the conflicts enacted through the 'mask' of racial identity, O'Connor evokes otherness but does not assume to know it: by not assimilating it into sameness, she respects its difference. She reveals how the reduction of black identity to the empty impenetrability of the minstrel 'blackface' enables the paradoxical concepts of "white-faced niggers" ("Revelation," CS 496) or a "nigger's white nigger" ("Judgement Day," CS 540). These figures demonstrate that the concept of race has more to do with reinforcing a position of economic subordination than it does with indicating an ethnic identity. Julian's mother's sentimental pity for the 'tragic mulatto' and Mrs Turpin's fantasy of racial difference - "herself but black" (CS 491) - conveys the white incapacity to conceive of difference.

The black characters depicted by O'Connor, however, embrace in ironic fashion this masquerade as a means of preserving privacy of identity and of expressing a coded dissent.⁴⁰ O'Connor's representations seem to fulfil Ralph Ellison's assertion, in "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958), that:

Very often . . . the Negro's masking is motivated . . . by a profound rejection of the image created to usurp his identity. Sometimes it is for the sheer joy of the joke; sometimes to challenge those who presume, across the psychological distance created by race manners, to know his identity.⁴¹

⁴⁰ O'Connor writes that "the uneducated Negro is not the clown he's made out to be. He's a man of very elaborate manners and great formality which he uses superbly for his own protection and to insure his own privacy". O'Connor quoted in Kahane, "The Artificial Niggers" 184-5.

⁴¹ Ellison 55.

The indolence and habitual duplicity demonstrated by O'Connor's rural black characters mimics a certain stereotype but also subverts it by betraying an astute and cunning deployment of dissimulation. In "A Circle in the Fire," Culver walks "pushing his head and shoulders forward at each step to give the appearance of hurrying" (CS 176). The uncanny quality of the human automaton here mocks his employer's assumption of sovereignty over his body. The black labourers under Tanner's supervision in "Judgement Day," simultaneously affect the threat of mutiny and render Tanner redundant by anticipating his words: "the negro would begin to rise - slowly but would be in the act - before the sentence was completed" (CS 537). Astor in "The Displaced Person" is cast in the role of the elderly purveyor of folk wisdom: "the old man knew when to answer and when not" (CS 215). His response to Mrs Shortley's scare-mongering, "you liable to hear most anything" (CS 199), cuts a fine line between vapid gullibility and outright scepticism. As Ralph Ellison writes of the grandfather in his novel *Invisible Man*: "his mask of meekness conceals the wisdom of one who has learned the secret of saying the 'yes' which accomplishes the expressive 'no'".⁴² Astor holds rhetorical conversations with the peacock within Mrs McIntyre's earshot as a way of openly expressing the unacceptable. His apparently empty mimicry of her platitudes - "me and you . . . is still here" (CS 214), "black and white . . . is the same" (CS 215) - subtly subverts them by an almost imperceptible shift of emphasis.

There is a reluctant awareness on the part of the white characters that they are engaged in a mere masquerade, determined by economic conditions but sustained only by a suspension of disbelief. Culver's slowness is presented as a dumb show of truculence by Mrs Cope in "A Circle in the Fire," but she herself answers with a pantomime of disbelief: "her eyes shut and her mouth stretched flat as if she were prepared for any ridiculous answer" (CS 177). Ellison writes that "out of

⁴² Ellison 56.

the counterfeiting of the black American's identity there arises a profound doubt in the white man's mind as to the authenticity of his own image of himself".⁴³ The 'failure' of black characters to function as flattering reflections of white authority is potentially subversive of the white conviction that the code of authority is entirely of their own volition.

Within the politics of the specular, the white subject claims ownership of the gaze and controlling surveillance of the black subject. As Frantz Fanon has written:

The white man has enjoyed for three thousand years the privilege of seeing without being seen. It was a seeing pure and uncomplicated; the light of his eyes drew all things from their primeval darkness. The whiteness of his skin was a further aspect of vision, a light condensed.⁴⁴

In the segregated South, the white gaze carries an entire history in its freight of insult. Even in the relative emancipation of the city in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," the condescension of Julian's mother towards the black woman provokes fury: "Julian could feel the rage in her at having no weapon like his mother's smile" (CS 417). A subtle and insidious method of insubordination, employed by the disempowered black characters of O'Connor's fiction, is the averted gaze: it belies the framing mask of acquiescence by refusing or defying the authority of the spectator.

The adopted vacuity of the averted gaze is simultaneously a parody of the white construction of black subjectivity and a return of its negating power. The white liberal, Asbury, stages a pantomime of solidarity with his mother's black dairy workers, in "The Enduring Chill," quite oblivious to their contempt. His lofty idealism barely masks the assertion of the primacy of white agency in history: "it was one of those moments of communion when the difference between black and white is absorbed into nothing" (CS 368). The objects of his experiment, Morgan and Randall, frustrate Asbury's attempt to establish a rapport with them by

⁴³ Ellison 53.

⁴⁴ Fanon quoted in Doane 223.

implicitly negating his own existence and denying him the satisfaction of bringing them within the privileged sphere of his gaze: "it was as if they were speaking to an invisible body located to the right or left of where he actually was" (CS 368). The cook in "The Lame Shall Enter First" defiantly returns the contempt of Rufus who has addressed her as 'Aunt Jemima': "the girl paused and trained an insolent gaze on them. They might have been dust on the floor" (CS 455).

Sovereignty over the controlling gaze is strongly marked with racial privilege and thus the inversion of the hierarchy of surveillance is powerfully disturbing. In "The Artificial Nigger," Nelson and Head are stripped of their privilege of being masters of all they survey: "black eyes in black faces were watching them from every direction" (CS 260). Tanner and Coleman engage in a curious exchange, in "Judgement Day," of a pair of wooden spectacles as a kind of contract of employment. This gesture is powerfully revealing of the nature of white power, its basis in fantasy and its underlying anxieties. Accepting the lenseless frames fashioned by the black man Coleman, Tanner undergoes a revelation: "He had an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. The vision failed him before he could decipher it" (CS 538-9).

The historical experience of the American South is constituted, in O'Connor's fiction, by denials and displacements. Indeed, in a number of narratives, and most significantly in "The Displaced Person," the repressed crises of American history, both past and present, find displaced expression in an event of profound historical crisis: the Holocaust. The memory of the Holocaust becomes the screen on which unresolved conflicts return.

The March of Time: History and Trauma

In "The Displaced Person," the visual evidence of the Holocaust, in the form of cinematic documentary footage of liberated camps, is registered in a traumatic manner. Just as Tanner's revelation "failed him before he could decipher it" (CS 539), so the sudden and shocking image of a mass grave sweeps over Mrs Shortley's consciousness, "before [she] could realise that it was real and take it into [her] head" (CS 196). Yet the image *does* return, compulsively and intrusively, in the form of unsummoned memory. It thereby fulfills Caruth's definition of trauma.⁴⁵ Mrs Shortley is visited by the memory of a liberated concentration camp:

A small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing. (CS 196)

The dispassionate quality of this description, with its grotesque motifs of fragmentation and dismemberment, suggests a stunned alienation. The violence that the image records seems immanent in the very medium which forcefully imprints it on the viewer's ill prepared consciousness. The cinematic image has the uncanny stillness of a freeze frame or traumatic flashback. It suspends the horror of a historical moment for an eternity - both abiding and elusive. By an association which becomes fatal, Mrs Shortley places the Polish refugees in the monochrome, two-dimensional plane of the screen as if they were shadowy simulations: "'you reckon they'll know what colours even is?'" (CS 196). The deadly progress of the deporting trains represents the dreadful and interminable progress of history, and both are captured in the coffin-like confinement of each individual frame of film. The motto of the newsreel - "'Time marches on!'" (CS

⁴⁵ "Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena." Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience," 181.

196) - identifies these images as belonging to the "March of Time" documentary series, but its heroic optimism is here in terrible juxtaposition with an apparently barbaric regression.

It is significant that in O'Connor's texts the experience of the Holocaust is mediated through two central signifiers of modernity: the cinema and the railway. The cinema transmits the visual documentary evidence of genocide. The railway is both a literal instrument and a symbolic signifier of the Holocaust. For O'Connor's deeply reactionary characters, the complicity of these apparatus of modernity in historical catastrophe only confirms their own revolt against the modern. Hence O'Connor's texts demonstrate a powerful problematic: that the Holocaust not only explodes a liberal myth of history as progress, but is itself enlisted by reactionary instinct in a renunciation of history as a process of change. Furthermore, the role allotted to the cinema and the railway in this problematic of history and modernity does not seem entirely accidental: both are implicated in the construction of the experience of modernity as shock. Moreover, they assume a compelling significance in their contribution to the relation between trauma and historical experience.

In employing the railway as a signifier of the Holocaust, O'Connor captures the indelible imprint made on contemporary consciousness by its transformation from a benign agent of human mobility into an instrument of terror: the freedom of movement granted by the arrivals and departures of travel is forever haunted by the fact of mass deportations and the gates of Auschwitz. This alienation constitutes a translation of the uncanny from the subjective to the historical plane; the Holocaust casts into crisis the history in which we were 'at home'. Elaine Scarry captures this quality of modern estrangement when she writes of the conversion of domestic objects - the window, the door, the chair, the bed - into instruments of torture:

The appearance of these common domestic objects in torture reports . . . is no more gratuitous and accidental than the fact that so much of our

awareness of Germany in the 1940s is attached to the words "ovens," "showers," "lampshade," and "soap".⁴⁶

Nor is this horror entirely irrational. It is a lucid recoil from the barbaric destination at which the advance of rationality has arrived. In one sense, the liquidation of human beings inflicted by the Holocaust represents the triumph of technology over the body. Both film and the locomotive are implicated in a modernity which inflicts a certain violence on the body. Miriam Hansen characterises modernity as the "traumatic reorganisation of perception".⁴⁷ The technology of the cinema, like that of the railway, imposes on consciousness the shocks inflicted on the body and senses by the automated mechanism of industrial capitalism:

With its dialectic of continuity and discontinuity, with the rapid succession and tactile thrust of its sounds and images, film rehearses in the realm of reception what the conveyor belt imposes upon human beings in the realm of production. (Hansen)⁴⁸

Hence, the cinema and the train are two of a number of new technologies which "contribute to the detachment or dissociation of the subject from the space of perception".⁴⁹

Both the railway and cinema contribute to an association between modernity and shock; they assume a significant role in the development of theories of shock and trauma.⁵⁰ The earliest accounts of the pathology of shock emerged out of

⁴⁶ Elaine Scarry, The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 41.

⁴⁷ Miriam Hansen, "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology'," *New German Critique* 40 (1987) 189.

⁴⁸ Hansen 184.

⁴⁹ Hansen 190. Indeed, Mary Ann Doane has noted the affinity between the railway and the cinema. The earliest moving pictures took the motion of trains as their subject, instituting the "persistent fascination of the classical cinema with trains and railroad stations, its narrative fixation upon moments of arrival and departure"; Doane attributes this affinity to an analogy of experience: "The railway passenger, like the cinema spectator, is subjected to a succession of images mediated by a frame." Doane 188.

⁵⁰ Adorno compares the explosive alienation experienced by the reader encountering Kafka's texts to the shock of the spectators who fled in fright from the first motion film of a train apparently shooting into the auditorium: "His texts are designed not to sustain a constant distance between themselves and their victim but rather to agitate his feelings

studies of railway accidents, the shellshock of First World War neuroses being the second major contribution made by the twentieth century to the evolution of shock. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch, the first accounts of shock, in relation to the railway accident, describe a "sudden and powerful event of violence that disrupts the continuity of an artificially/mechanically created motion or situation, and also the subsequent state of derangement".⁵¹ It is the very fact of human assimilation to the mechanised motion of the locomotive which makes such a shock possible: the passenger is absorbed into their surroundings as if to a second nature.

In O'Connor's fiction, it could be said that history, conceived as inexorable advance, is the second nature to which subjects succumb, as if to the soporific motion of the train. Relinquishing individual agency, they are possessed by its dynamics but all the while lulled by the impression of movement; the effortless conveyance that the train delivers mimics the myth of history as progress. The condition of shock is induced by a disruption of this continuity, but the experience is constituted by a failure to assimilate it into consciousness: it exerts its presence by eruptions from the unconscious in the form of flashbacks. As Caruth writes, "the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations".⁵²

Latency, the delayed effect, is the defining characteristic of shock - one which Caruth takes from Freud. Freud takes the railway accident as his example to illustrate his theory of shock. Significantly, he articulates this proposition within a history, in "Moses and Monethoism," of the captivity, exile and return of the Jewish people:

to a point where he fears that the narrative will shoot towards him like a locomotive in a three-dimensional film. Such aggressive physical proximity undermines the reader's habit of identifying himself with the figures in the novel." Adorno, *Prisms* 246.

⁵¹ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), 1977) 151.

⁵² Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History" 181.

It may happen that someone gets away, apparently unharmed, from the spot where he has suffered a shocking accident, for instance a train collision. In the course of the following weeks, however, he develops a series of grave psychical and motor symptoms, which can be ascribed only to his shock or whatever else happened at the time of the accident. He has developed a "traumatic neurosis". This appears quite incomprehensible and is therefore a novel fact. The time that elapsed between the accident and the first appearance of symptoms is called the "incubation period", a transparent allusion to the pathology of infectious disease. . . . It is the feature one might term *latency*.⁵³

The period that has elapsed between the event and the symptom seems to suggest that the experience has been forgotten; the person was unharmed and so the delayed effects are incomprehensible. However, as Caruth suggests, it is "only in and through its inherent forgetting that [the traumatic event] is first experienced at all".⁵⁴ Caruth's theory of trauma is informed both by theories of shock and by the testimonies of survivors of the Holocaust. Hence, trauma provides a psychoanalytic account of the impact of catastrophic historical events. Trauma is constituted by unassimilated historical experience, but this is not to suggest that the past is lost to the oblivion of forgetfulness. On the contrary, history is preserved in the unconscious because it is not resolved and discharged by the conscious mind. Such a privileged role for the unconscious in the transmission of history is supported by Freud's distinction between unconscious memory and the conscious act of recollection, such that the latter has the effect of "destroying or eradicating what the former was designed to preserve" (Jameson).⁵⁵

In trauma, memory erupts from the unconscious in the form of intrusive symptoms which include the vivid visual memory. The cinematic technique of the flashback could be read as resembling this traumatic return of memory. Caruth writes that the "flashback, it seems . . . provides a form of recall that survives at

⁵³ Freud quoted in Caruth, *American Imago* 48:1 (1991) 6.

⁵⁴ Caruth, "Unclaimed Experience" 7.

⁵⁵ Frederic Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971) 62-3.

the cost of willed memory or of the very continuity of conscious thought".⁵⁶ The flashback preserves *because* it alienates - it disrupts the static present with the otherness of the past. The flashback as a metaphor for historical understanding is also evoked by Walter Benjamin, who proposes the "shock effect of the film."⁵⁷ Benjamin suggests an analogy between Freudian theory and film's contribution to the field of perception: "The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses."⁵⁸ The work of this 'optical unconscious' (to use Rosalind Krauss's phrase⁵⁹), could be detected in Benjamin's comments on the comprehension of the past in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History":

The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognised and is never seen again. . . . To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was' (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.⁶⁰

In the particular case of the Holocaust, the failure to assimilate experience, when consciously chosen by a witness, *could* indicate an ethical reaction: a refusal to admit any philosophical system which could accommodate such an atrocity. Claude Lanzmann has spoken of a 'refusal of understanding' as a profoundly ethical position:

There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of *Shoah*. I had clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude.⁶¹

In O'Connor's texts, however, this 'refusal of understanding' indicates a failure of witnessing. O'Connor's American characters are not actual victims, bystanders or perpetrators of the Holocaust. However, such is the impact of the visual

⁵⁶ Caruth, introduction, *American Imago*, 48:4 (1991) 418.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations* 232.

⁵⁸ Benjamin, *Illuminations* 230.

⁵⁹ See Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993).

⁶⁰ Benjamin, *Illuminations* 247.

⁶¹ Claude Lanzmann quoted in Caruth, introduction, *American Imago* 48:4 (1991) 421.

revelation of the Holocaust, that they assume fantastic identifications as if obeying an unconscious injunction. Initially victims only of an overpowering fear, O'Connor's ^{characters} are transformed into agents of an arbitrary violence as if to evade becoming its victim.

Displaced Persons: The Foreign Body

The trauma of the Holocaust, both as an event and as knowledge, encounters the suppressed conflicts of American history in O'Connor's fiction; the responses of O'Connor's characters carry this unresolved history and unwittingly reenact it. The sequence of perverse identifications which O'Connor depicts in her characters, especially in "The Displaced Person," fulfil Robert Jay Lifton's account of 'false witness'. Lifton suggests that when a witness to violence in turn becomes an instigator of violence, it is a result of 'false witness', a "compensatory process which is very dangerous".⁶² The death anxiety provoked by such an experience is suppressed and converted into a desire to kill: that is, in order to ensure safety from violence, the victim adopts the extreme measure of assuming the role of agent of that violence. Lifton's proposition is an attempt to account for the disturbing phenomena that the lesson of violence is not inevitably that violence must cease. In the midst of the trauma of violence, the subject may make a choice as if the roles of victim and perpetrator were the only positions available.

Lifton writes that this process of displacement proceeds through the production of "designated victims" - a process which draws its material from the historically specific scene in which it occurs:

⁶² Robert Jay Lifton, "Interview With Robert Jay Lifton," with Cathy Caruth, *American Imago* 48:1 (1991) 166.

False witness tends to be a political and ideological process. And really false witness is at the heart of most victimisation. Groups victimise others, they create what I now call "designated victims", the Jews in Europe, the Blacks in this country [the U.S]. They are people off whom we live not only economically, as is often the case, but psychologically. That is, we reassert our own vitality and symbolic immortality from denying them their right to live and by identifying them with the death-taint, by designating them as victims. . . . *That's* what false witness is. It's deriving one's solution to one's death anxiety from extreme trauma, in this case in an extreme situation [the My Lai massacre], by exploiting a group of people and rendering them victims, designated victims for that psychological work.⁶³

In O'Connor's narratives history is shown to proceed through this mechanism of false witness - a mechanism to which the foreign body of the displaced person, in the narrative of that title, falls victim.⁶⁴ The image of the Holocaust becomes the site on which these displacements and repressions are reproduced.

O'Connor depicts a society in thrall to a myth of a golden age to which it yearns to return. The advance of history is perceived, in the words of the ossified General in "A Late Encounter With the Enemy," as "deadly as the River Styx" (CS 134). Post Civil War history is resentfully perceived as a process of accumulating debt. The South is engaged in a futile pursuit of recuperation; in "The Displaced Person," the Judge's desire for a return to a society without money implicitly advocates a return to slavery. As Astor recalls: "Judge say he long for the day when he be too poor to pay a nigger to work'" (CS 215). Like Judge Clane's scheme to pursue compensation for the loss of confederate money in Carson McCullers' *Clock Without Hands*, this preposterous grievance betrays an incapacity to interpret the emancipation of the slaves as anything other than an outrage against property rights. As Leonard Olschner writes: "History and seeming timelessness are the antagonistic forces. . . . it is history which breaks into the assumed unshakable, static social order of the American South in the

⁶³ Lifton 166.

⁶⁴ "We must presume . . . that the psychical trauma - or more precisely the memory of the trauma - acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must be continued to be regarded as an agent." Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James and Alix Strachey (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1974) 56-7.

years following World War II"⁶⁵. The past persists in attitudes of uncanny suspension. Conversely, modern mass culture conveys its icons into the depths of the rural South in a radically remote fashion. The faded sweatshirts sported by a number of characters function as distant and decomposing snapshots of a distant American mythology: the "faded cowboy on a horse" (CS 276) worn satirically by Joy in "Good Country People," the "silver stallion" (CS 126) rearing from a murderer's chest in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and the "faded destroyer" (CS 179) sinking into a boy's hollow ribs in "A Circle in the Fire."

Suspended in time but possessed by history, the uncanny stasis of O'Connor's South is ghost-ridden by the past. The devastation of history has a protracted and belated quality. Indeed, with its motifs of dislocation and depopulation, O'Connor's fiction gathers within itself the residues of successive historical crises. The ubiquity of single women managing farms in the absence of men is generally characteristic of the disruption of war but, in O'Connor's narratives, it evokes most potently the American Civil War. It records the emergence, out of the idealised fragility of the 'white southern lady', a generation of indomitable women. Olschner writes of Mrs McIntyre in "The Displaced Person," that she is: reminiscent of plantation owners' wives during and after the Civil War, wives who, after their husbands died or after the slaves were emancipated, were forced to manage plantations and themselves do physical labour while their husbands were at war.⁶⁶

Returning war veterans also punctuate O'Connor's narratives. In "The Displaced Person," Mr Shortley is a First World War veteran who habitually characterises himself as returned from the dead: "'If everyone was as dead as I am,'" he declares, "'nobody would have no trouble'" (CS 206). In the punningly titled "Parker's Back," Parker leaves for the Second World War as a "boy whose mouth habitually hung open" (CS 513). However, on his return the experience

⁶⁵ Leonard M. Olschner, "Annotations on History and Society in Flannery O'Connor's 'The Displaced Person'," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 16 (1987) 62.

⁶⁶ Olschner 70.

which has divested him of his innocence remains unrelated. In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby's brother's experience of war fails to make him a "somebody from somewhere" (CS 95) but, on the contrary, deprives him all origin; he returns to find his home town has simply disappeared, presumably due to depopulation. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes experiences the same uncanny projection of war's destruction. His four years in the army are a vacuum in the novel, but perhaps a critically defining absence. His experience is characterised entirely by loss. Forgotten by the army in foreign places, he is remembered only long enough for the removal of a fragment of shrapnel whose form nevertheless lingers in his body - its phantom existence doubles his own ghostly return from death. The impact of his war experience is constituted by a profound ambiguity. So massive that it exceeds representation, it courts both a transcendental significance and the void of utter meaninglessness: "He had the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten had happened to him" (WB 68). The wilful quality of incomprehension which characterises the historical experience of the South in O'Connor's narratives, bears the imprint of denial. In the aptly titled "A Late Encounter With The Enemy," the General's conviction is expressive of this denial: "He didn't have any use for history because he never expected to meet it again" (CS 135-6). However, the effort to maintain the repression of the past is persistently met with uncanny returns, heralded by the irrational.

The ethical ambivalence of Mrs Shortley's recollection of a liberated concentration camp, captures this dimension of disavowal. Her description temporarily maintains the frozen quality of shock - "a head . . . a foot, a knee" (CS 196) - but it holds a latent revulsion. Her refusal of understanding indicates a slide into a generalised phobic disgust rather than the adoption of a position of moral outrage. The dense claustrophobia of the image and its excess of death is overwhelming and threatens to engulf the spectator in a tide of horror. As Julia

Kristeva has written, in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, the corpse threatens to throw its witness into a vertiginous crisis of identity:

In that compelling, raw, insolent thing in the morgue's full sunlight, in that thing that no longer matches and therefore no longer signifies anything, I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away. The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject.⁶⁷

The uncanny reproduction of images - whether mechanical or unconscious - is spuriously traced, by the logic revealed in this narrative, to the swarming disintegration and pollution of the corpse. As Elisabeth Bronfen has written on the relation between death and representation: "As the *unheimlich* liminality of the corpse translates into its own double in the form of representation, this repetition will either perform a safe fixture or preserve threatening oscillation".⁶⁸ The cinematic medium becomes a casualty to the contagion of trauma. The apparently austere and disembodied quality of the image are belied by its susceptibility to contagion as it becomes a vehicle of infection. Caruth has written of the "danger . . . of the trauma's 'contagion', of the traumatising of the ones who listen."⁶⁹ The danger is here even more troubling: it is a contagion borne not out of empathy but out of aversion and denial.

The alien character of the Guizacs' language, Polish, is perceived as complicit in this uncanny proliferation of anxiety. Moreover, it is posited as an agent of its immanent violence. Guizac's name is wilfully mispronounced as "Gobblehook", evoking archaic fears of devouring and tearing. Refusing to harbour foreign sounds within her mouth, Mrs Shortley attaches a superstitious dread to the possession of a second language: "'knowing two languages was like having eyes in the back of your head'" (CS 233). Moreover, its doubling productions are here

⁶⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) 4.

⁶⁸ Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 257.

⁶⁹ Caruth 10.

equated with the manufacture of death. "Not without reason," writes Bronfen, "does the word *corpus* refer both to the body of a dead human or animal and to a collection of writings".⁷⁰ The corpse and the dead letter are collapsed into one figure of contagion in "The Displaced Person". Guizac's foreign words are revenants - an uncannily animated script which, in Mrs Shortley's imagination, are mobilised and advancing:

She began to imagine a war of words, to see the Polish words and the English words coming at each other, stalking forward, not sentences, just words, gabble gabble gabble, flung out high and shrill and stalking forward and then grappling with each other. She saw the Polish words, dirty and all-knowing and unreformed, flinging mud on the clean English words until everything was equally dirty. She saw them all piled high up in a room, all the dead dirty words, theirs and hers too, piled up like the naked bodies in the newsreel. (CS 209)

This image captures an insidious shift of culpability so that the victim, Guizac, becomes the perpetrator and the bystander, Mrs Shortley, the victim. Its origins can be traced to the numb ambivalence of Mrs Shortley's memory which allows the corpse to become the source as well as the destination of violence. "Piled" and "tangled" in a "heap", they not only represent but also inflict a grotesque assault on the human form - the "dead naked people" provoke an ambiguous revulsion. The recoil from the euphemistic "part" suggests a phobic recoil incapable of making ethical distinctions. The logic which attaches a generalised dread to the victim rather than to the perpetrator similarly casts the Guizacs as envoys of horror, whose passage across the Atlantic harbours contagion.

The pathos of the Guizac's escape out of the nightmare of European history into life in the new world is transformed into an uncanny survival of death in life. Mrs McIntyre reads Guizac's face as a microcosm of the crimes committed in the "devil's experiment station" (CS 205). His face, like Frankenstein's monster, seems assembled from the dead fragments of violated graves: "his whole face looked as if it might have been patched together out of several others" (CS 222).

⁷⁰ Bronfen 71.

The implication of pollution and contagion conspires to a "plague motif" which, according to René Girard, "illuminates but a single aspect: the collective character of the disaster, its universally contagious nature."⁷¹ Indeed, in "The Displaced Person", the Guizacs are associated with pestilence: the girl's name, Sledgewig, is metonymically collapsed into an association with the bollweevil, which devastated Southern farm lands. Moreover, Mrs Shortley has the "sudden intuition" that "like rats with typhoid fleas" they may have "carried all those murderous ways over the water with them" (CS 196).

Leonard M. Olschner has written of the historical context within which this narrative is placed. The reception of European refugees in the U.S was often reluctant and even hostile. Olschner quotes the Texan Congressman, Ed Gossett, voicing objections in 1947: "While a few good people remain in these [D.P] camps, they are by and large the refuse of Europe. The camps are filled with bums, criminals, black-marketeers, subversives, revolutionists, and crackpots of all colours and hues. . . .'"⁷² The "march of the Displaced Persons", as it was described in a *Life* magazine of 1945,⁷³ took the form of an invasion in the popular imagination. Indeed, the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 incorporated such prejudices in the form of discrimination against Catholics and, moreover, Jews.

The very statelessness of the displaced person renders him strange and ominous on American soil. "He is a foreigner: he is from nowhere, from everywhere" (Kristeva):⁷⁴ the refugee is a person without origins, without the family, blood and soil which constitute the rootedness of identity in the rural American South. In *Strangers to Ourselves*, Julia Kristeva suggests that a paradox emerges out of the

⁷¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977) 77.

⁷² Olschner 65.

⁷³ See Olschner 64.

⁷⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 30.

common genealogy shared by the concepts of the universal 'rights of man' and of nationalism: the person without a state is a person without a claim to humanity. Kristeva concurs with Hannah Arendt in a belief that "the national legacy served as guarantee for Nazi criminality".⁷⁵ Arendt's lament for the fate of those deprived of the protection of nationality and subject to the extremities of nationalism captures the plight of the 'displaced person' - both the refugee in the modern world and the character in O'Connor's text: "The world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human It seems that a man who is nothing but a man has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man."⁷⁶

The perverse transformation of Guizac from a victim into a perpetrator accords with a recurrent pattern of displacement evident in O'Connor's narratives. "The Displaced Person" is indeed a narrative about displacement, not merely of people but of history, memory, and guilt. That it is the Holocaust - with its place in an irrational ideology of racial purity and heredity - which revives this mechanism, is revealing of the content of repressed historical material in this American context. That is, it exposes a persistent racial anxiety compounded by historical denial.

The sight of a corpse may evoke responses which are, in many ways, universal reactions. However, the implicit assault on the very construction of the body evoked by the corpse also challenges the body's historically specific determinants.

As Kristeva writes:

The corpse (or cadaver: *cadere*, to fall) . . . upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. . . . as in true theatre, without make up or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 151.

⁷⁶ Hannah Arendt quoted in Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 151-2.

⁷⁷ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 3.

The theatre of masks in O'Connor's fiction is expressive of a preoccupation with differentiation which is predominantly racial.

O'Connor's characters engage in an obsessive ritual of invocation of categories: "sometimes Mrs Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people" (CS 491). In "Revelation," Mrs Turpin inflicts on herself the purely academic, but somehow titillating, dilemma of a choice between the equally abhorred fates of being 'white trash' or black. The agony of this decision is prolonged with illicit relish and its conclusion is presumably meant to deliver a sense of her own lofty moral sensibility: she chooses to be a "neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black" (CS 491). However, the compulsive quality of this naming ritual betrays the fragility of these categories. It performs a function of reinforcement which paradoxically casts into doubt the stability of the whole structure. Mrs Cope's litany of blessings registers her gratitude at being white and wealthy: "They might have had to live in a development themselves or they might have been Negroes or they might have been in iron lungs or they might have been Europeans ridden in boxcars like cattle. . . ." (CS 190). The Holocaust, simply denoted by the boxcars, becomes a symbol of this anxiety of differentiation. The clinically hierarchised society of Nazi Germany might be assumed to be the envy of the racist mentality, but the Holocaust reveals both the violence immanent in such segregation and its fundamentally arbitrary nature. A totalitarian society has the simultaneous aspect of both supreme order and supreme disorder in its implacable adherence to its own strict but irrational logic. The gratitude for social and racial privilege which O'Connor's characters express, transparently exposes a sense of its fragility, even its illegitimacy, and fear of its loss. The leisurely deliberation in which Mrs Cope indulges in her waking hours haunts her in more exacting form in her sleep: "Usually by the time she had fallen asleep all the classes of people were moiling and roiling around in her head, and she would dream they were all crammed in together in a box car, being ridden off to be put in a gas oven" (CS 492). The historical displacements of the white South - whose

very identity is grounded in the often violent and institutional subjection of racial others - are both a symptom and a defence against this arbitrary quality.

In "The Artificial Nigger," the process of Nelson's education in racism begins on the train when he feels a "sudden keen pride" (CS 257) in his grandfather's racist wit. Nelson converts a humiliation inflicted by his own grandfather into a blame, directed at the guiltless black passengers, that speaks of envy: "he hated him [the 'Negro'] with a fierce raw fresh hate; and also, he understood now why his grandfather disliked them" (CS 255-6). The 'artificial nigger', however, restores their solidarity: "some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat" (CS 269). The language of deliverance and martyrdom, so evocative of the fate of African-Americans, is appropriated to construct the myth of the South as besieged and wronged. O'Connor depicts a white society whose seemingly unconscious ruse is to sustain the smart of defeat and the abject aspect of the vanquished as a facade beneath which the exercise of privilege and power endures. The recurring complaint of white landowners against the thankless burden of authority and the ingratitude of dependents, is compulsively articulated as if in response to an unceasing but unspoken reproach. So pervasive is this logic that even, or perhaps especially, dissent is caught within its framework and reproduces its structures. White liberalism is satirised by O'Connor for its complicity with myths of martyrdom and deliverance and the motives of its champions are deeply suspect.

Sheppard's compassion for the club-footed and delinquent Rufus is a transparent sublimation of grief for his deceased wife and as such its origins and effects have pathos as well as culpability. However, his desire to liberate Rufus also affords him the satisfaction of pseudo-religious omnipotence and grants him the attendant illusion of invulnerability: "his benefactor was impervious to insult . . . there were no cracks in his armour of kindness and patience where a successful shaft could be driven" (CS 460-1). Furthermore, Julian and Asbury (in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" and "The Enduring Chill") are white

men of privileged ancestry whose adoption of progressive views is partially motivated by the integral offence they will cause to their despised mothers. They seem to be prompted by the addictive frisson of transgression which reinforces taboo with its every violation. Julian toys with ludicrous scenarios which he sadistically anticipates will inflict a bodily shock on his mother. These include befriending a black doctor and taking place in a sit-in, but are overruled by the operatic scale of insult which he assumes marriage to a black woman will deliver to his bigoted mother.

The scene of the historic Civil Rights movement is merely a stage on which to play out white fantasies, and individuals are deployed as props for dramatic effect. Racial equality and desegregation are perceived by these 'progressives' as the absorption of blacks into white culture - a gesture of accommodation which anticipates some reparation or reward. The attempt to identify with the oppressed is an effort to enjoy simultaneously the perceived moral authority of the victim and the elation of the victor. The masochistic identification with suffering - "go ahead and persecute us" (CS 414) thrills Julian - necessarily displaces the historical experience of the other and demonstrates little authentic investment in political change. On the contrary, Julian gains "a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation" (CS 412). Moreover, a cultural envy seems to be at work in the appropriation of narratives of suffering: Mary George acidly comments of Asbury, "the artist arrives at the gas chamber" (CS 363).

"The Displaced Person" was published in 1954 and so preceded the emergence, at the end of the decade, of a growing literature of witness and testimony to the Holocaust. It can be placed rather within the collective amnesia of Cold War hysteria. From this vantage point it explosively portrays the irruption of the implicitly racial displacements and denials at the heart of the historical experience of the American South. The appalling reproduction of violence in "The Displaced Person" seems to belong to such an irrational script of sacrifice as that outlined by

René Girard. Girard writes that "any community that has fallen prey to violence or has been stricken by some overwhelming catastrophe hurls itself blindly into the search for a scapegoat".⁷⁸ However, the production of a scapegoat in O'Connor's text is articulated within a highly specific historical language. Frederick Asals reads O'Connor's text through Girard's *Violence and the Sacred*; he comments that the recurrence of corpses in O'Connor's texts seems to suggest the arrest of history:

The point is not merely the insistence in these parallels on the moribund, on American corpses that recall the vision of Europe, but also on the unchanging, on the *rigor mortis* that inhabits the living as well as the dead, the ferocious insistence that in all the ways that matter, time does *not* march on.⁷⁹

Asals rather coldly remarks on the failure of the act of sacrifice in O'Connor's text and attributes this to the decline of religion. However, I would suggest that O'Connor's text is not absorbed by the mechanisms, be they historical or ritual, that it depicts. If a failure is to be identified, it is a failure of historical understanding of which O'Connor's text is not a symptom but a critique.

In "The Displaced Person," as soon as Guizac's industrious efforts begin to threaten the social hierarchy, Mrs McIntyre's pity for him is swiftly withdrawn. Her sentiments embark on an ominous decline through resentment into violent retribution: "she had had a hard time herself People ought to have to struggle He had probably not had to struggle enough" (CS 219). In the circulation and appropriation of roles of suffering and perpetration in "The Displaced Person," the distribution of culpability becomes crucially blurred.

From his first reception in the American South, Guizac demonstrates a reckless disregard for racial distinction: "he shook their hands, like he didn't know the difference, like he might have been as black as them'" (CS 207). As a consequence, he is quickly designated the target of a racially marked narrative of

⁷⁸ Girard 79.

⁷⁹ Frederick Asals, "Differentiation, Violence and 'The Displaced Person'," *The Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 13 (1984) 10.

sexual violation. National differences symbolically substitute for racial difference. Mr Shortley's First World War experience informs him that there were "all kinds then but that none of them were like us" (CS 227); he conflates the Polish Guizacs with the Germans from whom they have fled. His declaration that he will not stand idle and witness "a woman done in by a foreigner" (CS 230) sexualises the conflict in terms familiar to the South. Indeed, it is Guizac's plan to marry his niece to the black labourer Sulk - in order to secure her release from a camp - which is the pivotal point in the channelling of violence against him. The revelation of this news to Mrs McIntyre induces a sense of immediate and intimate jeopardy: her heart beats "as if some interior violence had already been done to her" (CS 224).

The phantom rape of white women by black men is the metaphorical apex in the construction of the white South as wronged and violated. Olschner writes that sexual relations between black men and white women "represented the violation of a virtually unassailable taboo in Southern culture, the violation of idealised white womanhood".⁸⁰ The significant violation is not so much of a woman's body as of the racial segregation of the South - the issue of sexual consent is irrelevant in terms of white national myth. This violation has the power to provoke collective violence in the form of the terrible weapon of racial oppression, lynching: in "The Displaced Person," this collective violence finds its displaced target in Guizac. A pervasive fear of racial intermingling, through violence or through the assumed desire of blacks to "'improve their colour'" ("Revelation," CS 496) in mixed marriage, is registered throughout O'Connor's texts. In "The Displaced Person," Sulk's tongue "describing little circles" (CS 219) and his "half grin" (CS 220), as he covets a photo of the niece, suggests a lascivious idiocy which simultaneously infantilises and demonises black male sexuality. The "bland and composed eyes" (CS 220) of the girl in her First Holy Communion dress, her

⁸⁰ Olschner 71-2.

blonde hair crowned by a "wreath" (CS 220), evokes the figures of a child bride *and* corpse: this frozen image, snatched out of death, gathers the horrors of child sexual abuse and necrophilia into the taboo of miscegenation. Mrs McIntyre's response is apoplectic and vicious: "You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking nigger! What kind of a monster are you!" (CS 222).

At the culmination of the narrative in "The Displaced Person," Guizac's posture echoes the cruel bodily fragmentation of the Holocaust, as recollected by Mrs Shortley, and anticipates his own fate: "feet and legs and trunk sticking impudently out from the side of the tractor" (CS 234). Guizac's murder seems to be compelled by an uncanny logic. However, the wilful disavowal of autonomy which it betrays resembles the passive complicity of a witness to an atrocity:

[Mrs McIntyre] heard the brake on the large tractor slip and, looking up, she saw it move forward, calculating its own path. Later she remembered that she had seen the Negro jump silently out of the way as if a spring in the earth had released him and that she had seen Mr Shortley turn his head with incredible slowness and stare silently over his shoulder and that she started to shout to the Displaced Person but that she had not. She had felt her eyes and Mr Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion for ever, and she had heard the little noise the Pole made as the tractor wheel broke his backbone. (CS 234)

Thus, history seems to compel its own repetition. The latent symptoms of historical crisis fail to emerge into ethical comprehension but instead act as the material of further violence. The slow motion of catastrophe in the final moments of "The Displaced Person" conspires to suspend its actors in a final frame of traumatic incomprehension, "froze[n] in collusion for ever" (CS 234).

"The violent, catastrophic aspect the encounter with the *foreigner* may assume", writes Kristeva in *Strangers to Ourselves*, "is to be included in the generalising consequences that seem to stem out of Freud's observations on the

activating of the uncanny".⁸¹ The foreigner is strange and unassimilated and yet familiar; in O'Connor's narrative, his otherness is feared and extinguished. In making this revelation, O'Connor's texts render themselves unacceptable: they reproduce a violence against the other and, moreover, they implicate the reader in this violence. Yet to blame O'Connor for the perpetration of textual atrocities, by accusing her of perversity and distortion, is to become complicit in the production of scapegoats.

The violence of O'Connor's texts has its origin in history. The power and significance of her narratives arises from their ability to challenge the reader's passive collusion in the displacements of history. The strangeness of her fiction preserves otherness and difference whether in identity or in history. If her narratives compel the reader to will the extinction of that troubling strangeness in her texts, they only reveal all the more profoundly the violence that an eclipse of difference can release.

Freud's driving curiosity about the elusive effect of the uncanny might be read as an obsession with the baleful and the irrational. By producing a text which names the uncanny, he has been assigned the role of author and originator of its alienating effects. However, Kristeva insists that his project is far from being a mission to render our world alien and inhospitable:

One cannot hope to understand Freud's contribution, in the specific field of psychiatry, outside of its humanistic and Romantic filiation. With the Freudian notion of the unconscious, the involution of the strange in the psyche loses its pathological effect and integrates within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness* that is both biological *and* symbolic and becomes an integral part of the *same*. Henceforth, the foreigner is neither a race nor a nation Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners.⁸²

"Delicately, analytically," writes Kristeva, "Freud does not speak of foreigners: he teaches us to detect foreignness in ourselves".⁸³ So it is with O'Connor's

⁸¹ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 190.

⁸² Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 181.

⁸³ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 191.

difficult and disconcerting texts: the crisis they engender is not only within the text but also within the subject.

O'Connor's texts do not themselves offer a route through which the reader can emerge from alienation - they demand of the reader a form of reading which will construct its own ethics. It is strange and, yet, therefore fitting that O'Connor's anti-humanism approaches, as if in reverse, the lesson which Kristeva draws from Freud's uncanny. That is, the necessity for a concept of human dignity that "implies not only *rights* but *desires* and *symbolic values*": one that "falls within the province of ethics and psychoanalysis."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 153.

8. "No Place Like Home": The Politics of Origin in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

In Flannery O'Connor's fiction, the traumas of the past can be read in the gestural code of the body; the body manifests the symptoms of an impasse of history. The body is revealed to be both the victim of historical crisis and the site within which its memory is preserved. The particular role assigned to the female body within this function is both distinctive and disturbing. O'Connor's texts demonstrate how a reactionary ideology, which enlists the powers of the irrational, appropriates the conjunction of femininity, materiality and the unconscious. The uncanny motifs which recur throughout O'Connor's fiction conspire to construct the maternal body as the uncanny place *par excellence*, subject to both nostalgia and dread. The repressed origin of an oppressive social order, the female body is posited as its agent but falls victim to its violence.

Flannery O'Connor has been suspected of bearing a punitive attitude towards women in her narratives. The seemingly relentless humiliations and often sexualised assaults to which her female characters are subjected have been interpreted as signifying O'Connor's collusion in violent misogyny. In her study of fiction by Southern women writers, Louise Westling suggests that O'Connor is a woman writer whose reading of a male literary tradition "formed her imagination through male conventions of misogyny, so that when she returns to

herself, she is more deeply imprisoned than ever."¹ Yet this imputation of inadvertent mimicry seems at odds with O'Connor's reputation as a writer of exceptional singularity. Christiane Beck has remarked that O'Connor is "famous for her relish for mutilating human bodies" - such notoriety is not achieved inadvertently.² O'Connor's acute black humour is perhaps rightly perceived to be a vehicle of violence; its iconoclasm careers disturbingly between exhilarating audacity and sheer alienation. Certainly, O'Connor refuses the implicitly maternal role of the author who consoles and reconciles; to the female reader who complained of the "bad taste" left in her mouth by O'Connor's fiction, she tartly retorted "you weren't supposed to eat it."³ The complicity between women and violence suggested by O'Connor's texts generates a deep unease, but to attribute this association to the wilful perversity of the author is to evade rather than address the issue. O'Connor's narratives are most powerfully significant for feminist inquiry in their revelation of how the association between the feminine and the unconscious is enlisted in service to a reactionary ideology of the irrational. The landscapes of O'Connor's texts are infused with a blood and soil nationalism; women embody the land within this ideology, whether as idealised icons of national identity or as phantoms of corporeal origin. O'Connor's texts demonstrate how the exclusion of women from the symbolic order renders them vulnerable to such appropriations: implicated as agents of an oppressive social order, they nevertheless remain victims of its violence.

¹ Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) 57.

² Christiane Beck, "Flannery O'Connor's Poetics of Space," *Realist of Distances: Flannery O'Connor Revisited*, ed. Karl-Heinz Westarp and Jan Nordby Gretlund (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1987) 139.

³ Quoted in Lisa Alther, introduction, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*, Flannery O'Connor (London: Women's Press, 1980) 3.

The Body of the Land: The 'Lady' and the 'Giant Wife'

The depopulated and derelict American South portrayed in Flannery O'Connor's fiction has a powerfully posthumous quality; it can be read as constituting an immutable residue left behind both by the devastation of war and by mass flight into the city. This last post of the past stages a mulish, and hopelessly belated, resistance to the advance of modernity.

O'Connor's narratives are historically placed in the decade following the Second World War, but the society which she depicts seems to be suspended in the devastation of the Civil War. It is still moved by a deeply reactionary nostalgia for the world of the ante-bellum plantation; it betrays a longing for a return to a romanticised golden age of white prosperity and authority. The haunting persistence of the icon of the 'white southern lady' - beyond its historical context - is one symptom of this regressive form of nationalism. Moreover, its symbolic resilience is also crucially revealing of the place of gender in an extremist ideology of land and race.

The outdated ideal of ladyhood is stubbornly upheld by the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," who refuses to compromise her standards of dress when travelling: "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady" (*The Complete Stories* 118). O'Connor demonstrates the sheer anachronism of the lady by reserving the most thorough encounter with modern America for its most zealous adherents. The grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," and Julian's mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," are marked by an incipient senility which hints at their historical redundancy. They are reluctant city dwellers, dependent on the grudging charity of their children. Their thoughts obsessively trace a place in racial privilege and tradition - immune to the reality of economic decline - to possibly imaginary ancestral homes. However, in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the grandmother's family embodies the impenetrable self-absorption of the modern nuclear family. It

is embedded in the eternal present of a mass consumer culture and traverses the Southern states within the solipistic confines of the family car.

O'Connor's ladies attempt to revive the past by affecting the gestures and manners of a bygone etiquette. Julian's mother enters a bus as if emerging into a drawing room, and the grandmother morbidly summons the impromptu audience of an imaginary ambulance crew to witness, where her family are unwilling, her impeccable taste. The condescension which the lady distributes as a time-honoured compensation for inequity, here generates scenes of excruciatingly inappropriate sentiment: the grandmother delights at the picturesque quality of a "cute little pickaninny" (CS 119) framed by rural poverty. The grandmother's reminiscences are met with a refusal of collective memory and history, but Julian's mother, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," meets the revenge of the past. She provokes, with an almost wilful inadvertency, the most striking manifestation of black militancy in O'Connor's writing: she is knocked to the ground by a black woman indignant at her condescension.

A compulsion to restage the past is similarly in evidence in "A Late Encounter with the Enemy," where a succession of parades, processions and premieres perform a myth of the white South with compensatory emphasis. Sally Poker Sash's fanatic loyalty to the military heritage of the old South - expressed through a devotion to her grandfather General - reveals the vicarious nature of women's relation to a masculine construction of time and history. The unnamed ladies of "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" are defined by their relation within a paternal family structure, whose absurdities are represented by their subordination to adult but infantile sons. Sally Poker Sash boasts an excess of title, but this only underlines the effect of her self-definition through her grandfather. It suspends her as a perpetual granddaughter at sixty-two years of age, an eternal child-spinster who renounces mature female identity. Moreover, her "sweet" fantasy of the General and her nephew - "the old man in his courageous gray and the young boy in his clean khaki" (CS 139) - idealises an

ascetic masculinity which implicitly negates the feminine. That her vision is undermined by the comically priapic figure of the senile, irascible General - "five feet four inches of pure game cock" (CS 135) - confirms the extent of her self-delusion.

The symbolic function of the 'lady' has its origins in the white South of plantations and slavery. An exemplary model beyond the feasible aspirations of most women, the 'lady' is guardian of home and hearth and, by extension, of the moral and spiritual tranquility of 'civilised' life. Anne Firor Scott portrays the ideal lady in the following hagiographic terms:

She was capable of acute perceptions about human relationships, and was a creature of tact, discernment, sympathy, and compassion. It was her nature to be self-denying, and she was given to suffering in silence, a characteristic said to endear her to men.⁴

This feminine ideal is elevated to a sacred principle on whose behalf the struggles of the male, public world are engaged. However, the construction of a separate affective and ethical realm could be said to function to vindicate the ferocity of acts committed in its defence - it effectively absolves the 'masculine' world of moral accountability. Indeed, it would seem that the idealisation of the feminine sphere advances in direct proportion to the brutality of the political domain. The white southern lady symbolises a social order founded on the violent subjection of slavery.

Thus, the position which the lady occupies is ambivalent; transcendence conceals complicity and her very passivity generates political extremity. Moreover, the class and race dimensions of 'ladyhood' do not simply inform restrictive eligibility. The ideal of white femininity is constructed *through* the symbolic suppression and actual oppression of other women, most significantly black women. As Barbara Christian has written, the "image of the delicate alabaster lady" requires an 'other' image of the feminine: "the image of the

⁴ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1830-1930* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970) 4.

southern lady, based as it was on a patriarchal plantation myth, demanded another female image, that of the mammy."⁵ Fundamentally disembodied, the 'lady's' liberation from flesh is at the expense of women of other classes and races who bear the symbolic and literal burden of corporeality and labour.

An impossibly anachronistic world of feudal chivalry is evoked by the 'lady's' archaic, aristocratic title; it hints at the ritualised sexual rivalry to which she is subject, but cannot anticipate the insidious gendering of racial politics which it encodes. As Barbara Christian writes: "Given the powerful language that the planters used to attack miscegenation, one could conclude that they saw it as a crime against the body politic."⁶ The dreaded violation of the honour and sexual purity of the white woman by subject races accrues the dimension of a founding national myth. The body of the nation and of the white Southern lady are conflated into one fantastic figure.⁷

The fetishised lady - a token of male agency rather than female autonomy - has a rather spectral quality. Idealised to the point of death, her otherworldliness transports her into martyrdom. Indeed, in O'Connor's fiction, the pursuit of 'ladyhood' takes the annihilating form of vicarious masquerade. A series of daughters in flight from 'ladyhood' fall into grotesque postures which parody the masquerade of femininity. The revolt against ladyhood throws its contours into relief; it reveals the negation of the female body which it harbours. However, the defiance of these daughter figures unwittingly colludes in this denial of feminine materiality. Employing their own bodies to inflict an iconoclastic assault on an

⁵ Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892-1976* (London: Greenwood, 1980) 8-9.

⁶ Christian 6.

⁷ The persistence of this myth of white womanhood is both witnessed and consolidated by D.W Griffiths' deployment of her as the central icon of his *Birth of a Nation* (1914), which simultaneously heralded the birth of the popular art form of modernity and immortalised a virulently racist myth of national identity for a new century.

image of femininity, they reproduce a punitive denial of female flesh. Defying a construction of innate and natural femininity, they themselves become monstrous.

The graceless girls and young women of O'Connor's fiction are abetted in sheer awkwardness by a repertoire of ugly appendages. Both the unnamed child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and Sally Virginia in "A Circle in the Fire," convey an unwittingly menacing appearance when they reveal a bristling array of dental braces: Sally is a "pale fat girl with a frowning squint" and a "large mouth full of silver bands" (CS 181), and the child's mouth "glare[s] like tin" (CS 237). Joy/Hulga assumes the inflexibility of her artificial leg throughout her entire body as if taking the form of her mother's worst nightmares of impropriety. Her posture is pervaded with perverse defiance as she stands "square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward" (CS 274). She shares with Mary Grace of 'Revelation' a quality of wilful 'ugliness' - the vernacular denoting an attitude as much as an appearance. Equally ill-named, Mary Grace and Joy Hopewell embrace intellectual pursuits in a vengeful disavowal of their femininity - they wield hefty textbooks like weapons. Their unappealing appearance - Joy is "bloated, rude, and squint-eyed" (CS_276) and Mary is "blue with acne" (CS 490) - is ambiguously both cause and effect of their intelligence.

The astute child of "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" and the bookish Sally Virginia of "A Circle in the Fire," are potential inheritors of the consuming bitterness of their adult counterparts but, in their childish whimsicality, they enjoy a transient liberation from prescriptive sexual identity.

Both girls harbour fantasies of androgyny. They echo the sexual ambiguity of girls in two other American women's texts of the female grotesque contemporary to O'Connor: Carson McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) and Jane Bowles' "A Stick of Green Candy" (1946). McCullers' Frankie yearns to go to war as a marine and be addressed as 'Addams' and Mary's imaginary soldier companions in "A Stick of Green Candy" see her as "like himself - a man without

a family".⁸ Similarly, Sally Virginia's play-acting of wartime masculine camaraderie is not only a release of bossy exhibitionism but an evasion of sexual difference. The child's ignorance of sexual difference facilitates ambitions - to be an engineer, soldier, doctor or saint - unconstrained by knowledge of conventional sexual roles. Indeed, in her fantasy of wartime heroism, she assumes the capacity to court martial anyone who attempts to propose marriage. Sally Virginia is deeply insulted at her inclusion in the same category of 'women' as her mother: she responds by "squinting fiercely as if she had been slapped in the face and couldn't see who had done it" (CS 185).

The appeal of masculine camaraderie seems to address a recoil from the suffocating world of women, but it exchanges lack of individuation for regimented anonymity. With their marching feet and snapping teeth, these characters haplessly mimic clockwork soldiers. Wartime heroism might be a translation of feminine selflessness into the public realm of recognition and reward, but the desire for an applauded death - as in the child's fantasy of martyrdom - remains a compromised and fatalistic form of rebellion.

In O'Connor's narratives, evasion of sexual difference merely repeats the suppression of the feminine. Androgyny, in the literal form of the hermaphrodite, slides into the grotesque form of freakish spectacle. The 'freak' haunts the child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" with his ominous refrain, "he may strike you thisaway" (CS 246). It speaks to her unarticulated fears with the same intimacy as the 'Half-Man Half-Woman' in the House of Freaks addresses McCullers' Frankie in *A Member of the Wedding*: "She was afraid of the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you."⁹ The sexual ambiguity of the 'freak' conveys the dangers of a body which exceeds the boundaries of

⁸ Jane Bowles, "A Stick of Green Candy," *Everything is Nice: The Collected Stories* (London: Virago, 1989) 127.

⁹ Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (London: Penguin, 1962) 27.

constructed sexual identity - it confirms an association between sexual difference and monstrosity. The child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," recoils from her adolescent cousins who have hurled themselves toward adult femininity and sexuality with a recklessness irreconcilable with 'ladyhood': "shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly" (CS 236), their physical expansiveness is indiscreet and indecorous. Their adolescent fervor is judged dangerously unruly and contained within the confinement of a convent school, which the child intuitively interprets as a correctional facility.

Such is the poverty of symbolic representation of the feminine that, whether in pursuit of or in flight from a narrow but officially sanctioned construction of femininity, O'Connor's characters traverse a parodic perspective of repetition and mimicry. Thus, it is all the more striking that a number of other female characters seem to betray a residue of an other language and iconography - one that is both archaic and maternal. There is an arresting predominance of lone mothers in possession of the land in O'Connor's fiction. The image of the single woman as sole surveyor of the fecund landscape - her spouse inexplicably absent and her fatherless children a manifestation of her own mysteriously chaste fertility - has powerful archaic resonances. She imparts an uncanny echo, across the centuries, of the arcane sovereignty of the ancient mother goddess. Furthermore, the bloody hues of the skies and the red earth of the landscape in O'Connor's writing, suggest a compelling intimacy between the form of the maternal body and the contours of the land. Louise Westling has strikingly captured its peculiar fascination:

No one can enter the world of Flannery O'Connor's fiction without sensing at once the strange power of its landscapes and skies. The raw earth gapes orange, red, and purple: but where it is cultivated neat little farms sit dreaming uneasily under swollen suns and glaring skies, their fertile pastures

protected by dark sentinel lines of gaunt woods. Sunsets are bruised purple or bloody red, bathing woods and meadows in vivid light.¹⁰

The body language of a number of female characters unwittingly evokes the gestural code of divine ancestors. Their looming presence miniaturises those around them and their irrefutably corporeal existence has as its centre the generative belly: in "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs Pritchard folds her arms "on a shelf of stomach" (CS 175) while in "The Displaced Person," Mrs Shortley sits with "her stomach in her lap, her arms on top of it" (CS 205). Even Mrs Shortley's gait demands the primacy of the flesh: "She approached, stomach foremost, head back, arms folded, boots flopping gently against her large legs" (CS 197). The habitual cradling posture of these women's arms suggests an auto-erotic self-possession. Ruby mentally hugs her "warm and fat and beautiful" (CS 99) body to herself in "A Stroke of Good Fortune": "she felt the wholeness of herself, a whole thing climbing the stairs" (CS 99). This impenetrably material quality reappears in a series of substantial children whose doubling resemblance seems to figure them as tokens of this maternal right. The "small robust figure" (CS 343) of Mary Fortune in "A View of the Woods," bears a "rich florid complexion" (CS 336) and walks with her "stomach forward, with a careful gait, something between a rock and a shuffle" (CS 339). Lucynell, a "big rosy-faced girl" (CS 150), incestuously shares the same name with her mother in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own."

However, these corpulent women are more commonly found in attitudes of self-sufficient reverie; their maternal imperative has an abstract and universal quality which asserts a sense of divine right to the possession of the land. Thus, in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," the evident poverty of Lucynell Crater is belied by reference to the "old woman's three mountains" (CS 150); she exhibits a sense of assurance "as if she were the owner of the sun" (CS 146). The superficially prosaic description of Mrs Freeman's presence in "Good Country

¹⁰ Westling 156.

People" - "real as several grain sacks" (CS 271) - harbours an evocation of female figures of agrarian myth, such as Ceres, who embody the abundance of harvest. Moreover, as the "giant wife of the countryside" (CS 194), Mrs Shortley exemplifies the atavistic quality of these figures whose bodies make primordial claims to the land:

Her arms were folded and as she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was. She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything. (CS 194)

Indeed, omens of threat to her domain are registered in her body without the mediation of conscious thought: her "stomach trembled as if there had been a slight quake in the heart of the mountain" (CS 196).¹¹ Even displaced into the barren wilderness of the city, the landlady in *Wise Blood* betrays an affinity with these 'giant wives': "She felt justified in getting anything at all back that she could, money or anything else, as if she had once owned the earth and been dispossessed of it" (WB 208). She demonstrates a conviction in her own right over resources which, by some unspecified injustice, have become temporarily alienated: "When she found a stream of wealth, she followed it to its source and before long, it was not distinguishable from her own" (WB 208). Her effort at incorporation is mimed by Mrs Shortley who, in her death throes, seems to be attempting to remedy the dispossession of death by taking her earthly heritage with her: "She thrashed forward and backward, clutching at everything she could get her hands on and hugging it to herself" (CS 213).

The corpulent self-absorption of the 'giant wives' seems radically at odds with the spectral ethereality of the white southern lady. The wives seem to manifest

¹¹ Mary L. Morton elaborates on this proximity between land and body when she describes Mrs Shortley as "a giantess whose slumber has been disturbed - the somnolence indeed of the rural South - and she prepares to repel any invasion of her primeval territory." Morton, "Doubling in Flannery O'Connor's Female Characters: Animus and Anima," *The Southern Quarterly* 23:4 (1985) 61.

the fecundity and plenitude of the land as contrasting doubles to the arid and angular landowners, whose authority over the landscape is not only tenuous but grudging. In "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs Cope surveys her evocatively "rich pastures and hills heavy with timber" but sorrowfully shakes her head "as if it might all be a burden she was trying to shake off her back" (CS 177).

There is a compensatory quality about the stature of the 'giant wives'; their invulnerable autonomy and fleshly abundance denotes not monstrosity but divinity. These atavistic figures are potential vehicles of a nostalgia which, mediated through prehistoric metaphors, might articulate a yearning for a lost maternal heritage.

Homesickness, Horror and the Maternal Body

Transferring the metaphorical currency of 'prehistory' from a world historical plane to an individual historical plane, the massive primordial contours of the 'wives' evoke a more intimate memory - that of the blissful gratifications of the pre-symbolic maternal body. Thus, the 'wives' potentially invoke the seductive myth of a lost, but recuperable female symbolic languishing in the oblivion of the unconscious. Where the phallogentric symbolic order offers only alienating appropriations of 'femininity', the unconscious can be posited as an idyllic, even utopian refuge of the repressed feminine - of corporeality, sexuality and maternity. However, O'Connor's texts invoke not only nostalgia for a lost state but a horror of origin.

Freud infamously resorted to an archaeological analogy when addressing the enigma of femininity. Writing of the pre-Oedipal bond between mother and daughter, Freud comments: "Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus, phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery, in another field, of the Minoan-

Mycenean civilisation behind the civilisation of Greece."¹² However, the inquiry that might follow from the 'surprise' of this inadvertent 'discovery', is almost instantaneously eclipsed by Freud's insistence on the impossibility of recovering this lost continent:

Everything in the sphere of this first attachment to the mother seemed to me so difficult to grasp in analysis - so grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify - that it was as if it had succumbed to an especially inexorable repression.¹³

Indeed, although Freud's metaphor carries possible connotations of excavation, it most powerfully conveys the weight of burial. This burial, moreover, forms the foundation of a successive civilisation, heralding the birth of Western culture and furnishing Freud with the myth of Oedipus. Sarah Kofman writes of Freud's reluctance to pursue this encounter with feminine difference - a failure which effects a suppression:

One loses the specificity, the radical strangeness of the totally other, one overcomes the astonishing "surprise" that the discovery of feminine sexuality elicited if one reinstates it within a process of a history that *must* lead to the Oedipus complex^{in every case.} If he has indeed discovered the Mycenean civilisation, Freud refuses to be Theseus, refuses to plunge into the labyrinth. . . . Freud's heroic model continues to be Oedipus, and for him woman is never the fiancée but still and always the mother.¹⁴

The mother, and the feminine, will remain buried. Irigaray suggests that this act of sacrifice prefigures the act of patricide posited by Freud as the founding symbolic act of society. Rewriting Freud's myth of origins, Irigaray suggests that this crime conceals an earlier violence: "the whole of our culture in the west is based upon the murder of the mother."¹⁵

¹² Sigmund Freud, "Female Sexuality" (1931), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works: Volume III*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1853) 226.

¹³ Freud, "Female Sexuality" 226.

¹⁴ Sarah Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman: Woman in Freud's Fiction*, trans. Catherine Porter, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 34-5.

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991) 47.

Irigaray elaborates the shadowy half-life to which Freud commits the maternal relation, and which he somewhat disingenuously renders in insubstantial monochrome: "The relationship with the mother is a mad desire, because it is the 'dark continent' *par excellence*. It remains in the shadows of our culture; it is its night and its hell."¹⁶ The repression of the maternal body - and with it the feminine and women - is not equivalent to a loss for what is 'lost' is constructed *through* its very repression. As Judith Butler has written: "the prediscursive maternal body is itself a production of a given historical discourse, an *effect* of culture rather than its secret cause."¹⁷ Butler writes of the necessity for feminists to construct a "critical genealogy"¹⁸ of the formulation of materiality: a task which is significant because materiality is the "site at which a certain drama of sexual difference plays itself out."¹⁹ The uncanny posits a certain history of the maternal body - one which holds it captive in the horrors of the unconscious. Thus, the fantastic irruption of the maternal body in O'Connor's fiction is overcast by a Gothic night and hell.

The return of the maternal body in O'Connor's texts is not only attended by nostalgia. It is overcast by a Gothic night and hell - by an uncanny dread of that which "ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (Freud).²⁰ Indeed, Freud posits the mother's body as the ultimate source of the uncanny:

It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This *unheimlich* place, however, is the entrance to the former *Heim* of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning. There is a joking saying that "Love is homesickness"; and whenever a man dreams of a place or a country and says to himself, while he is still dreaming: "this place is

¹⁶ Irigaray, "The Bodily Encounter with the Mother," *Irigaray Reader* 35.

¹⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (London: Routledge, 1993) 80-81.

¹⁸ Butler 32.

¹⁹ Butler 49.

²⁰ Freud, "The Uncanny," *Art and Literature*, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1985) 345.

familiar to me, I've been here before", we may interpret the place as being his mother's genitals or her body.²¹

The female body is both foreign and familiar - the object of yearning and aversion. However, in O'Connor's texts, nostalgia for a return to a golden age of maternal plenitude is overpowered by a dread of the repressed mother, who is a phantom of the unconscious, both the product and object of repression. It is this irrational dread which is evoked by O'Connor's 'giant wives'. It is elaborated around recurring images of the maternal body as the origin of arbitrary violence and death. As Claire Kahane has written: "In O'Connor's fiction, the pervasive question "What have you seen?" repeatedly leads us to a vision of the female body as ^{the} maternal legacy, arousing fears of physical mutilation and destruction."²²

The home and hearth, the traditional site of female dominion, are symbolically associated with the maternal body. They become the stage of a Gothic claustrophobia: familial domesticity falls into incestuous recoil. A succession of houses of women in O'Connor's narratives seethe with unspoken and oppressive tensions. Heavy irony attends O'Connor's depictions of the 'comforts of home' and 'good country people': "'there's no place like home'" (WB 5) opines Mrs Wally Bee Hitchcock to Hazel Motes as he flees a vanished home, haunted by the image of his dead mother in her coffin. The platitudinous cult of kinship traverses the very ambivalence inherent in Freud's uncanny; that which is *heimlich* (homely) slips almost imperceptibly into the *unheimlich* as familiarity generates secrecy which topples into dread. "There's no place like home": the banal sentiment conceals a profound unease - there is no such place, only likenesses, uncanny resemblances.

²¹ Freud, "The Uncanny" 368. Freud's examples of the uncanny embrace both poles of the conjunction of femininity and materiality: the inertia of the puppet, mannequin or automata, and the fecundity of the maternal body as origin.

²² Claire Kahane, "The Maternal Legacy: The Grotesque Tradition in Flannery O'Connor's Female Gothic," *The Female Gothic*, ed. Juliann Fleenor (London: Eden, 1983) 247.

The mother's body inscribes its memory in motifs of live burial. Mrs Pritchard dwells compulsively on the fascination of a woman who conceives and gives birth within an iron lung; this deeply ambivalent image collapses the womb and tomb into one lethal enclosure and suggests a monstrous violation of the grave. The tremors of live burial are also evoked in instances of travel in which the liminal passage from one state to another is undergone within the perilous confines of hearse-like cars or coffin-like train berths. Hazel Motes is haunted by the image of his dead mother in her coffin - a legacy slyly compounded by his inheritance of his mother's wardrobe.²³

Dread of dissolution and collapse of the self compels a flight from the maternal body - a flight whose course returns to origin in "The River" and "The Lame Shall Enter First." Norton and Bevel are compelled by neglect and grief to escape the unbearable gravity of selfhood; they attempt a suicidal projection, into the heavens or the watery depths, which implicitly betrays a yearning to return to the oblivion of the mother's body. This course evokes an abject revulsion from their inadequate fathers - a response which fulfils Irigaray's account of the dread of the womb: "A vague sort of taboo is in force. There would be a danger of fusion, death, lethal sleep, if the father did not intervene to sever this uncomfortably close link to the original matrix."²⁴ Norton's grief for his dead mother, in "The Lame Shall Enter First," slides into a desire for death. This desire conflates the womb and the grave even as it seeks to recover the mother from death. Norton's regressive descent is marked by his choice of smooth, sweet infantile foods. Furthermore, he is glimpsed in his lightening lit room as a "large pale frog" (CS 452) as if undergoing a Darwinian relapse. Indeed, in his mute misery, he trusses

²³ Writing of the affinity between O'Connor and the Gothic horror of Edgar Allen Poe, Frederick Asals discovers this influence in the motifs of live burial in *Wise Blood*: a novel where the self is "buried alive in matter." Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982) 52.

²⁴ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 14.

himself up in a rope in an apparent effort to return himself to unconscious gestation. Norton's father is repulsed to discover him hiding in his mother's winter coat, as if he had insinuated himself into the empty husk of her corpse: he "winced as if he had seen the larva inside a cocoon" (CS 457). The sacred quality of the dead mother's memory is illustrated by the taboo which Norton constructs around her bedroom: the usurper, Rufus, slides his hand through the drawer of her dresser in a violation which Norton witnesses as "sacrilege in a holy place" (CS 455).

Though not actually bereaved, Bevel, like Norton, seems to be suffering a comparable state of melancholia in "The River": it is symptomatic of mourning but induced by neglect. When he appears before his parents only in an uncomprehending twilight of consciousness, his damp and encrusted form is barely distinguishable from insentient life: "One of Bevel's eyes was closed and the other half closed; his nose was running and he kept his mouth open and breathed through it" (CS 169). He displays a possessive interest in the secretions of his body; he examines the contents of his borrowed handkerchief and stores it in the lining of his coat, where he will later conceal more stolen property, in a gesture of incorporation within his body. Bevel's unobserved habits - picking at his eyes and ears, scavenging a meal of scraps from the debris of his parents' flat and engaging in desultory despoiling - have the dejected quality of the captive animals depicted in *Wise Blood*. His consumption seems a joyless attempt to compensate for an unarticulated loss; his ultimate submersion in the bloody waters of the river has the irresistible symbolism of a return to the oblivion of the womb.

The deadened and deathly mother exerts a malevolent spell in O'Connor's fiction.²⁵ Moreover, this fantastic figure is posited as the source around which

²⁵ Claire Kahane attributes this effect to the Gothic heritage of O'Connor's writing: "What I see repeatedly locked into the forbidden centre of the Gothic which draws me inward is the spectral presence of a dead-undead mother, archaic and all-encompassing. . . ." Kahane, "The Gothic Mirror," *The (M)other Tongue: Essays in Feminist*

there gathers a violence of a radically ambivalent agency. Mothers and children are depicted as caught within the vice of a terrible dependency. Sally Virginia succinctly sums up this tension in a retort to her mother in "A Circle in the Fire": "I ain't you!" (CS 190). However, this childish defiance becomes morassed in a tortuous adult complex of resentment and obligation. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Julian unwittingly adopts a suggestively homoerotic patron by characterising himself as Saint Sebastien, impaled by his mother's selflessness and "sacrificed to her pleasure" (CS 406). In "An Enduring Chill," the air is heavy with discussion of the reproductive perils of the dairy cows and Asbury, who cannot stomach his 'mother's milk', rebukes her: "why did you pinion me?" (CS 364).

However, there is an equally compelling suggestion of the martyrdom of the mother. Mary Fortune's mother, in "A View of the Woods," witnesses the strife consuming her family and is convulsed by the throes of an unnamed agony; she emits a "moan as if a dull knife were being turned slowly in her chest" and abandons herself with the "worn out air" (CS 343) of a fatally depleted invalid, her head "rolling back and forth on the rim of her chair" (CS 344). The macabre stories of vengeful children in *Wise Blood* and "A Circle in the Fire" take as their theme the mother as victim to an apparently supernatural malice. Mrs Pritchard's recollection of a child who poisoned its adoptive mother invokes the child as an alien and malevolent usurper. Sabbath Hawkes, in *Wise Blood*, tells both of a murdered baby which haunted its killer and of a child locked in a chicken crate which piously prophesied its grandmother's torment. In these instances, the horror of child murder is implicitly overshadowed by a dread of the supernatural powers of infants which survive beyond the grave. The translation of the vulnerability and dependence of the child into a vindictive omnipotence is

expressive of the fears of the physical and psychological costs of maternity; it is translated into the fantastic form of the female Gothic. In "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Ruby imagines her brother as a malevolent spirit waiting on an opportunity to possess and deaden her mother: "she saw him waiting out nowhere before he was born, just waiting, waiting to make his mother, only thirty-four, into an old woman" (CS 97). Ascending from the city streets, which are characteristically hellish in O'Connor's fiction, Ruby "spit[s] the word from her mouth this time as if it were a poisonous seed" (CS 95); she implicitly refuses her place in the fertility cycle signified by the pomegranate seed of Persephone. Ruby is haunted by her own dead mother's body, ravaged and depleted by incessant child-bearing, as both a vengeful phantom and an image of her own fate: "a puckered-up old yellow apple, sour, she had always looked sour, she had always looked like she wasn't satisfied with anything" (CS 97). In *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes fears his mother's vengeance from beyond the grave:

He had seen her face through the crack when they were shutting the top on her. He was sixteen then. He had seen the shadow that came down over her face and pulled her mouth down as if she wasn't any more satisfied dead than alive, as if she were going to spring up and shove the lid back and fly out and satisfy herself: but they shut it. She might have been going to fly out of there, she might have been going to spring. He saw her in his sleep, terrible, like a huge bat, dart from the closing, fly out of there. . . . (WB 20-21)

The insatiability of the devouring mother is set against the abject hunger of abandoned children; in defence against the predatory mother, the child, or more specifically the son, seeks to suppress her in the gloomy oblivion of the unconscious. As Irigaray writes: "The devouring monster we have turned the mother into is an inverted reflection of the blind consumption that she is forced to submit to."²⁶

The circulation of blame, vengeance and persecution which seems to emanate from the maternal body reinstates the repression from which compromised

²⁶ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies* 15.

maternity has made a partial emergence. Moreover, female sexual difference is itself buried with the feminine - consigned with the maternal to the unconscious. This is evident in the moments of uncanny horror which attend the rare instances of sexual intimacy in O'Connor's fiction.

In "The Comforts of Home," sexual dread is eminent in Thomas's revulsion for the "skin-like feel" of Star Drake's 'purse': "as it opened, he caught an unmistakable odour of the girl" (CS 402). In *Wise Blood*, Hazel is equally haunted by the image of his dead mother in her coffin and by the spectacle which met his eyes as a boy in the freak tent of a carnival:

He went through the flap of the tent and inside there was another tent and he went through that. All he could see were the backs of the men. He climbed up on a bench and looked over their heads. They were looking down into a lowered place where something white was lying, squirming a little, in a box lined with black cloth. For a second he thought it was a skinned animal and then he saw it was a woman. (WB 56)

The uncanny horror of sexual difference is reinforced with Hazel Motes' sexual initiation with Leora Watts, who addresses herself as "momma" (WB 28). Hazel finds himself "washed ashore on her" (WB 53) like a fragment of inconsequential flotsam thrown up by the primal sea of femininity. Moreover, Leora Watts has a revenant quality: her 'glistening' white skin has the luminosity of a corpse and her teeth, which are "small and pointed and speckled with green" (WB 27-8), have vampiric overtones. Hazel and Enoch are later transfixed by a woman - the mother of two small boys, their own doubles - who emerges from a swimming pool as if from a primeval grave: "her face appeared, long and cadaverous, with a bandage-like bathing cap coming down almost to her eyes, and sharp teeth protruding from her mouth" (WB 78). Gripped equally by prurience and terror, Hazel and Enoch are captured by the petrifying collusion of maternity, sexuality and death.

The contrast between the chaste rectitude and propriety of the 'lady', and the archaic and irrational dread surrounding the maternal body is striking. Whereas the 'lady' represents transcendence, the maternal phantom offers the vertiginous

prospect of the gaping abyss. As Irigaray writes, the "opening of the mother, the opening to the mother, appear as threats of contagion, contamination, falling into sickness, madness, death."²⁷ The construction of an ideal of femininity by splitting the feminine into sanctioned and outlawed aspects is a familiar gesture of patriarchal ideology. O'Connor's narratives reveal how the baleful aspect of maternal horror overpowers the exemplary standard of the 'lady'. Moreover, her texts demonstrate how this seemingly subversive horror is enlisted to compound the very social order which renounces it; just as the repression of the maternal does the work of patriarchal ideology, so does its licensed return.

The ambivalence attending the maternal body is not subversive of the symbolic order - it is structurally crucial to it. Ambivalence reinforces the dynamic of repression; it does so through a process of licensed release and reinforcing suppression. Furthermore, in the specific context of O'Connor's fiction, where the female body is implicated in a politics of national identity, this route to the unconscious serves a particular ideological function in the access it grants to the irrational. As an object of taboo, the maternal body is attributed an arcane authority which issues, from the depths of the unconscious, irrational compulsions and prohibitions. The conflation of the symbolism of the female body and that of national identity enables the mobilisation of this spurious sovereignty over issues of land and race; the maternal body is plunged into complicity with a pernicious ideology of blood and soil.

A Place Like Home: The Politics of Origin

Writing of the maternal body as the vehicle of nostalgia for a mythical place or country known as home, Freud implicitly posits the mother's body as the 'mother

²⁷ Irigaray, *Sexes and Genalogies* 15.

country' - the site of origin as the collective homeland. Freud cannot have been unaware of the role of the *heim* in the construction of national identity; the home and hearth are not merely the site of a female domain, but also the idealised origin of a national culture founded on kinship and inheritance. Indeed, in *Strangers to Ourselves*, Kristeva proposes that Freud's concept of the uncanny shares a common genealogy with the development of "mystical idea of the nation": "not a political one, but organic, evolutionary, at the same time vital and metaphysical - the expression of a nearly irrational and discernible spirit."²⁸ The 'romanticism' of national feeling assumes a crucial role in the genesis of some extremist forms of nationalism. Writing about Germany in the 1930's in *Heritage of Our Times*, Ernst Bloch diagnosed a "romanticism of the earth"²⁹ and "enchantment by the soil";³⁰ a particular 'romantic anti-capitalism' articulating a revolt against modernity through a 'return' to the earth. Arising out of contemporary political antagonism, but appropriating archaic modes of expression, this tide of reaction cloaks itself in the irrational: "The country forces of reaction seem literally well-founded, not just economically but also 'chthonically'. And this sunken mother-house lies revealed again today, with all the instincts all the remnants of its spell."³¹

Without eclipsing the very different historical circumstances of Germany in the 1930's and the American South in the 1950's, it is nevertheless possible to find parallels in the symbolic significance of the maternal body to these 'country forces of reaction'.³² O'Connor's texts reveal the construction of the maternal

²⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 176.

²⁹ Ernst Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times*, trans. Neville and Stephen Plaice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 49.

³⁰ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 49.

³¹ Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 51.

³² Writing in 1930, Bloch does venture such a bold comparison between the revival of archaic violence in Europe and the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan in the the U.S: "Here are medieval lanes again, St. Vitus's dance, Jews beaten to death, the poisoning of wells and the plague, faces and gestures as if on the Mocking of Christ and other gothic

body as the focus of a politics of land and race - a construction which draws upon both historically specific dimensions *and* the forces of unconscious.

The employment of an icon of white femininity under constant sexual peril makes available a certain language of possession in relation to the land. As Louise Westling has written of the myths of American history, the colonial seizure of native lands cast itself in terms which mobilised metaphors both of chivlary and of violation and rape: "Although the concept of earth as mother is an ancient one, the European explorers and settlers of the New World emphasised another, equally old feminine dimension in their view of the land as virginal garden."³³ The landscape in O'Connor's fiction is the stage of real and imagined assaults and the lone female characters which inhabit it are its victims. In an essay on the 'poetics of space' in O'Connor's fiction, Christiane Beck outline a symbolic topology at work in her texts:

The town constitutes one spatial pole, totally negative, of the writers' typology while the opposite pole is the remote clearing in the woods, inaccessible to the mechanised world of modern life, protected by its impregnable primitivity. . . . Between these two poles lies O'Connor's favourite battleground that of most of her stories, the self-enclosed farms run by her domineering and struggling widows forming a threatening space, relentlessly spied and preyed upon.³⁴

The metaphors of siege which pervade O'Connor's fiction have a strong historical precedent: "the southern identity has been linked from the first to a siege mentality" (Sheldon Hackney).³⁵ Moreover, as Jon Lance Bacon has noted, O'Connor's siege narratives are informed by the 'invasion motifs' of Cold War

panels. This kind of popular depth has probably dried up in other countries; only the lynchers in the southern states of America, Ku Klux Klansman . . . go along with it." Bloch, *Heritage of Our Times* 56-7.

³³ Westling 10.

³⁴ Beck 140-41.

³⁵ Hackney quoted by Leonard Olschner, "Annotations on History and Society in Flannery O'Connor's 'The Displaced Person'," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin* 16 (1987) 62.

paranoia;³⁶ O'Connor's symbolic topology gives coded expression to contemporary political conflicts.

Within this drama of contested space, borders and horizons acquire a symbolism of supernatural import. Marching trees, bloody skies and taut horizons effect ominously fraught boundaries, both vigilant and vulnerable. In "Greenleaf" the "black wall" of trees hold a "sharp sawtooth edge" (CS 321) to the sky while in "A View of the Woods", the trees form "mysterious dark files that were marching across the water" (CS 356). The 'view' that Mary Fortune venerates in "A View of the Woods," threatens a malevolent animation; bearing down on its human subjects, the horizon seems to demand a tribute of appeasement. Mrs Cope lives in fear of a fiery apocalypse of her own imaginings in "A Circle in the Fire" and the "gray-blue sentinel line of trees" (CS 176) has a dangerously mutinous appearance. The claustrophobia of her vigilance is contagious and the sky has the aspect of "pushing against the fortress wall" (CS 176) as if anticipating the inferno.

The striking recurrence of oral metaphors at work in the symbolism of the land is redolent of the metaphors of insatiability which have attended the maternal body in O'Connor's narratives. The poor are attributed an appetite which approaches metaphysical proportions. The taut skin of these people bespeaks their radical hunger: Parker's wife's face is "thin and drawn as tight as the skin on an onion" (CS 10), while the boys in "A Circle in the Fire" bear a "look of hardened hunger" (CS 185). The painfully raw features of Wendall and Cory in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" - the "red faces and high cheek bones and pale seed-like eyes" (CS 240) - suggest a feral voracity behind a proud reserve. The Greenleaf twins are similarly "long-legged and raw-boned and red-skinned with bright grasping fox-coloured eyes" (CS 317). The landowners attempt to bolster their fragile

³⁶ Such scenarios posit an enemy within of anonymous infiltrators, but do not acknowledge the very real threat of such American secret armies as the 'Invisible Empire' of the Ku Klux Klan.

authority with spiralling narratives of self-righteous deprecation. However, their oral excess is met with the sparse and laconic retorts of the poor.

The very economy of the language of the poor conveys a stubborn resignation to mean gratifications. The import of expression is borne by gesture and a reluctance to relinquish words to articulation conveys the poverty of oral exchange: in *Wise Blood* the pungent rejoinder, "you said a mouthful" (143), is made to a man who speaks without moving his lips. Moreover, the poor express their situation through the resonant language of 'satisfaction' - a term which gathers the sense both of physical satiation and of a more profound claim to the fulfilment of obligation. The Connin boys seem compelled by this unspecified grievance and find short-lived relief in childish cruelty: "their stern faces didn't brighten any but they seemed to become less taut, as if some great need had been partly satisfied" (CS 162). This constitutional dissatisfaction inverts the relation of obligation which the landowners attempt to impose. The land owning Mrs Cope adopts the mock humility of the self-righteous by affecting the fatalistic religion of the dispossessed - "'I can always find something to be thankful for'" (CS 177) - but her litany is one of minor tribulation and delivery from small trials. However, her grudging generosity is swiftly withdrawn on the non-return of gratitude by the boys who bear a "composed and unsatisfied" expression which doesn't "lighten" (CS 180) at the offer of food; it harbours the desire for an almost apocalyptic revenge.

The radical hunger of the poor is represented by their leanness. However, the corpulence of the doubling 'wives' seems to vindicate the landowners' fears of this predatory voracity. Maud Ellmann captures the irrational fears encoded in aversion to the bodies of the hungry: "fat has shifted from a sign of affluence to a sign of poverty, growing fearsome in the transformation, as if the fat of the land

were rising up against the class that feeds upon it."³⁷ Thus, the Greenleafs are characterised as living like "lilies of the field, off the fat that she had struggled to put into the land" (CS 319). More explicitly, Mrs May characterises herself as subject to constant vampiric depletion by the 'shiftless' people and their hogs, mules and scrub bulls. Indeed, the narrative of "Greenleaf" opens with a nightmare of literal devoural by the Greenleaf bull who is an agent of their depleting dependence. The itinerant poor are posited as laying siege to the fertile earth. They are implicitly constructed as a parasitic infestation; swarming over the surface of the land, their polluting presence transforms it into barren, unyielding 'dirt'. In "A Circle in the Fire," Mrs Cope attacks the nut grass "as if they were an evil sent directly by the devil to destroy the place" (CS 175) and perversely characterises her black employees as "destructive and impersonal as the nut grass" (CS 177). Mrs McIntyre is haunted by the "'swelling'" (CS 216) of the world's population in "The Displaced Person": she makes the same complaint of being "drained dry" by "poor white trash and niggers" (CS 202) and darkly declares her survival of the "constant drain of a tribe of moody and unpredictable Negroes" and "incidental bloodsuckers" (CS 218).

This translation of a symbolism of the body onto the borders and boundaries of the land draws upon a potent myth of imperilled white femininity. However, O'Connor's texts reveal that the space contested within these dramas of siege is not so much the integrity of the female body as the principle of property.

At the centre of the symbolic fortress constructed in O'Connor's texts, is the prize of white privilege: the sacred space of the ancestral home. The displacement and dispossession upon which this monument is founded is implicitly related to the symbolism of the 'property' of the imagination. This complicity is elaborated in Alice Walker's essay on O'Connor, in which she returns with her

³⁷ Maud Ellmann, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993) 2-3.

mother to the site of her own and O'Connor's family homes. "This house," writes Walker:

called "the Cline House", was built by slaves who made the bricks by hand. O'Connor's biographers are always impressed by this fact, as if it adds the blessed sign of aristocracy, but whenever I read it I think that those slaves were some of my own relatives, toiling in the stifling middle-Georgia heat, to erect her grandfather's house. . . . Whenever I visit antebellum homes in the South, with their spacious rooms, their grand staircases, their shaded back windows that, without the thickly planted trees, would look out onto the now vanished slave quarters in the back, this is invariably my thought. I stand in the backyard gazing up at the windows inside looking down into the backyard, and between the me that is on the ground and the me that is at the windows, History is caught.³⁸

Walker suggests a dispossession of the rarefied space, the "high-ceilinged room sparsely settled with large pieces of antique furniture" (CS 413-4), from which Julian's imagination in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" takes its dimensions, despite his ostensible contempt for his lost family heritage. In her moment of crisis in "The Displaced Person," Mrs Shortley similarly retreats to the veiled heart of her home: a "closet-like space" that was "dark and quiet as a chapel" and which features a shrine-like desk and a "tabernacle" (CS 221) safe. In contrast to the febrile overcrowding of the houses of women, a still and tranquil air attends the absent presence of her former husband: "It was a kind of memorial to him, sacred because he had conducted his business there" (CS 221). Like a divine totemic ancestor, the Judge instils his religion in her from beyond the grave: "the chair gave a rusty skeletal groan that sounded something like him when he had complained of his poverty" (CS 221). Similarly, the grandmother's memory of her own ancestral home is constructed around an empty centre which suggests that the 'femininity' of the hearth masks the truly determining dynamic of property. Fantasising on her theme of heritage, the grandmother's imagination summons the image of a hidden passage leading to concealed treasure.

³⁸ Alice Walker, "Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor," *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (London: Virago, 1988) 47.

The translation of the symbolism of the female body onto the land is both an agent and a symptom of this ideological displacement. Moreover, it reveals an intimate relation between race and property, heredity and inheritance. An anxiety about 'breeding' and 'good blood' is manifested throughout O'Connor's texts. Mrs May's conflation of the 'white trash' Greenleafs' with their verminous stock, as "scrub-human" (CS 317), sinks them into abject bestiality. The Greenleaf bull's darkly comic courtship of Mrs May reveals an underlying dread: her back becomes "stiff as a rake handle" (CS 315) with revulsion at the concept of intermarriage. In "The Displaced Person," Mrs McIntyre's anxiety about the effects of Guizac, the 'displaced person', on the social order generates a nightmare of her own displacement into Mr Shortley's house. Julian salaciously toys with the idea of interracial intimacy, in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," in his puerile fantasies of outrage against his mother's sensibilities, but the event itself seems all but unrepresentable. The marriage between Sulk and Guizac's niece, in "The Displaced Person," is arranged over a photographic token of her existence which preserves her in the remote austerity of two-dimensional monochrome.

However, although 'blood' and 'breeding' are deferred to as arcane and immutable principles, the recurring motif of substituted children suggests the fragility of such structures of inheritance. In "The Comforts of Home," Thomas feels degraded by association as a result of his mother's indiscriminate charity: "Thomas felt a deep unbearable loathing for himself as if he were turning slowly into the girl" (CS 385). In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," June Star does not conceal her disgust at Red Sammy's wife teasing offer to take her in to her evidently inferior 'white trash' home. Mrs May's impatience with her own parasitic sons and envy of the Greenleaf boys' business acumen in "Greenleaf" leads her to betray herself through a Freudian slip: "'they ought to have been my sons'" (CS 321). Her resentment at the Greenleaf's self-improvement is

expressed in the belief that they must have employed dissimulation: "disguised in their uniforms, they could not be told from other people's children" (CS 318).

The collapse of distinction between 'classes' of white people heralds an even more radical subversion of the social order: disintegration of racial difference. This dissolution is the feared result of intermarriage, but is also associated with social mobility which subverts racial and class codes. The urban emancipation of Tanner's neighbour in "Judgement Day" is implicitly a manifestation of this unease translated into a confusion over her colour: "She didn't look like any kind of woman, black or white, he had ever seen before and he remained pressed against the wall, frightened more than anything else, and feigning invisibility" (CS 544). Doctor Foley's mixed racial heritage - black, Native American and white - and his purchase of Tanner's land are equally symbolic of his crime against racial and class hierarchy.

The issue of race questions even more profoundly the ideological construction of maternity and origin. The symbolic substitution of children is haunted by their literal exchange as commodities in slavery; the violence which meets Julian's mother's gift of a penny to a black child can be attributed to its overtones of purchase. Indeed, the substitute maternal roles which black women inhabit in O'Connor's texts demonstrate how the appropriations of slavery are perpetuated in the 'free market': that is, the appropriation not only of the labour but also of sexuality and maternity of black bodies.

Employed in domestic service as cooks, cleaners and nursemaids, black women become the object of a certain nostalgia. The cook delivers benevolent rebukes to the child in "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" which are reminiscent of Berenice, in McCullers' *The Member of the Wedding*, who mothers an unofficial kitchen family of the tomboyish Frankie and the whimsical John Henry. Furthermore, when the neglected Bevel glimpses a dreaming black woman in "The River," his vantage point suggestively resembles that from which Norton scours the heavens for his lost mother. However, more characteristically, Julian's mother recalls

with insipid sentiment her "'old darky'" (CS 409) nurse, Caroline. However, Caroline's remembered tenderness and loyalty do nothing to counteract Julian's mother's assumption of the general criminality of her race.

It seems a paradox that the maternal function is projected, both symbolically and historically, onto the denigrated bodies of black women. As Barbara Christian comments, that "the planters could relegate the duties of motherhood, a revered and honoured state, to a being supposedly lower than human, reveals their own confusion about the value of motherhood."³⁹ The racial and class privilege of the 'white southern lady' is grounded in her liberation from degrading materiality; black women not only bear the burden of productive labour but also the work of reproduction.⁴⁰ Yet even such a displacement is made to serve the martyrdom of the lady and, by implication, of the South. Mary Chesnut's claim that "'there is no slave, after all, like a wife'"⁴¹ effectively appropriated not only the labour of black women and men but their narrative also. In terms which are revived by O'Connor's post Second World War landowners, Myrta L. Avery inverts, with thoughtless audacity, an incontrovertible relation of power: "Our burden of work and responsibility was simply staggering. . . . I was glad and thankful - on my own account when slavery ended, and I ceased to belong body and soul to my negroes."⁴² The displacement of corporeality onto designated others simultaneously naturalises their subjection and grants an illusive sovereignty at their expense. As Jane Gallop has written, the mind-body split depends on "other

³⁹ Christian 11.

⁴⁰ Jim Swan has commented on the "remarkable circumstance that Freud had, in effect, *two* mothers: his actual mother - whose nakedness he can only mention in Latin - and his Nannie whom he remembers in association with numerous disturbing sexual experiences." Swan finds a comparable division of the maternal function in the history of the U.S: "A parallel situation is the American slave-holding south, where white infants were nursed by black Mammies and grew up into a culture that idealised white women". Swan, "*Mater* and Nannie: Freud's Two Mothers and the Discovery of the Oedipus Complex," *American Imago* 31:1 (1974) 34 and 36.

⁴¹ Scott 50.

⁴² Quoted in Scott 49.

sexes, classes and races to embody the body as well as care for the Master's body . . . so he could consider himself disembodied, autonomous, and free to will."⁴³

When black women acquiesce *in* the role of substitute mother it would seem that, from the perspective of white society, their nurturing femininity effaces their racial identity. However, the expression of dissent by black women translates them instantly into figures of dread; objects of ambivalent desire and denial, their racial difference now functions to consolidate the horror of sexual difference. They embody a collapse of racial and sexual difference which is already latent in Freud's metaphor of the 'dark continent'. As Mary Ann Doane has commented:

The phrase transforms female sexuality into an unexplored territory, an enigmatic, unknowable place concealed from the theoretical gaze and hence the epistemological power of the psychoanalyst. . . . The fact that Freud himself borrowed the phrase from Victorian colonialist texts in which it was used to designate Africa is often forgotten.⁴⁴

The "large, gaily-dressed, sullen-looking colored woman" (CS 415) in "Everything That Rises Must Converge," with her "bulging green thighs" and "mammoth bosom" (CS 416), is a phantom of compensatory corporeal plenitude and phallic maternity. Nelson's encounter with a "large colored woman" (CS 261) in "The Artificial Nigger," induces a pleasurable vertigo. Standing barefoot in a dress that reveals her "exact shape" (CS 261) and sinking her hand into a deep halo of hair, she is a figure of simultaneous revelation and enigma. As such, she is constructed by the very contours of white fantasy. However, the potency of these figures is ultimately threatening; their titillating evocation of maternal origin is swiftly translated into horror, just as Nelson's bliss descends into the abyss of collapse of self.

The Gothic horror of maternity reveals the disavowed racial other as origin. The quest for origin in "The Artificial Nigger," arrives in the city of Nelson's

⁴³ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia, 1988) 19-20.

⁴⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1966) 209. See also, David Macey, "The Dark Continent," *Lacan in Contexts* (London: Verso, 1988).

birth but discovers at its heart the "endless pitchblack tunnels" of the sewers. Their labyrinthine course, which threaten to "suck" (CS 259) in hapless victims, is symbolically both feminine and maternal in its function as the bowels of the city. Moreover, descent into the underworld is into a 'heart of darkness' of the black ghetto. The chain of association seems to find its destination in the body of a black woman. Transfixed by fascination with the barefoot woman, Nelson's sensation of "reeling down through a pitch black tunnel" (CS 262) forges an irrefutable association with the dreaded sewers. A horror of origin reveals a horror of difference which is, devastatingly, both sexual and racial.

O'Connor's depiction of the agency of women within an oppressive social order is profoundly ambivalent. Her female characters exist within an ideology apparently 'feminised' by the symbolic centrality of an icon of womanhood. Indeed, many occupy positions of authority independent of men who, if they are not absent, are senile or infantile. Single women enjoy sole possession of the land in a considerable number of narratives: "Greenleaf," "The Enduring Chill," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," "A Circle in the Fire," "Good Country People" and "The Displaced Person." However, the authority of this seemingly female world is precarious. There is a quality of usurpation in this exercise of female rule; its illegitimacy seems demonstrated by the fact that it is riven by rivalry between female doubles - mothers and daughters, employers and employees - and irruptions of chaos and insurrection. The autonomy that these women possess is equally illusory; it is overruled by an ideology grounded in the right to act on women's behalf. This ideology positions women more often as victims than as agents; besieged and imperilled by an often sexualised threat, female autonomy is perilously fragile.

Moreover, the intimate collusion between femininity, maternity and death is only compounded by the morbid preoccupations of the most symbolically powerful female figures, the 'giant wives'. Morton writes of Mrs Pritchard that

her "conversation establishes her chthonic affinities with human sexuality, irrationality and death - characteristic of the mythos of femininity".⁴⁵ However, her monologues are devoid of the regenerative dimension which such a mythos would presumably entail. Mrs Freeman is similarly possessed of a morally dubious voyeurism fuelled by a "special fondness for the details of secret infections, hidden deformities, assaults upon children. Of diseases, she preferred the lingering or incurable" (CS 275). Mrs Greenleaf collects newspaper cuttings of rapes, crimes and wrecks and preserves them like sacred relics. She buries her cuttings and the "terrible urgency" of her "guttural agonised voice" (CS 316) as she prays over them seems to betray a residue of the erotic ecstasy of an arcane religious hysteria. Moreover, her "obscene" (CS 317) sprawl in the earth in the throes of possession, evokes a horror of origin which associates maternity with the insatiability of the grave: "she fell back flat in the dirt, a huge human mound, her legs and arms spread out as if she were trying to wrap them around the earth" (CS 317). Mrs Pritchard's appetite makes dark demands: she "could not stand an anti-climax. She required the taste of blood from time to time to keep her equilibrium" (CS 189).

The obsession of the 'giant wives' with the vulnerability of the body and the progress of its mortal decline posits the circulation of an arbitrary and merciless violence. Their intimacy with its destination towards the weak seems to render them complicit in its project; they seem to collude in the construction of the female body as a receptacle of disease and death.

The disturbing nature of the role of women within O'Connor's texts emerges from the contribution they seem to make to what Jacqueline Rose terms "the power of spectacle, femininity, and violence."⁴⁶ Women seem to be doubly implicated in the violent extremity of an irrational ideology of blood and soil.

⁴⁵ Morton 58.

⁴⁶ Jacqueline Rose, *Why War? - Psychoanalysis, Politics, and the Return to Melanie Klein* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) 47.

Where the supine collusion of the 'lady' offers one model of the feminine in politics, the bloodlust of the 'wives' offers an even more disturbing and insufficiently acknowledged one. Motherhood is commandeered to consolidate the social order - the maternal bond serves as a model for extremism and violence. The visceral intimacy between mother and child and its extension in familial kinship is made to serve as the symbol of an identity beyond individual agency, crudely determined by race. Moreover, the ruthless tenacity detected in a mother's love is translated into a murderous prerogative, appropriated on behalf of the clan. Thus, the powerful tenderness is transformed into the right to kill another mother's children: mother love sanctions infanticide. The apparent ubiquity of the feminine and of women within this violent ideology of blood and soil in O'Connor's texts, thus reveals a paradox: women are posited as victim *and* agent, origin *and* target of violence.

The conjunction between the feminine and the irrational poses exacting questions of women's relations to politics and ethics. The association of women and extremism has troubling effects. It 'feminises' the ideology in question, propelling it into the political wilderness of the unconscious where its 'irrationality' absolves it of the credibility of scrutiny. Equally, this association pathologises femininity.⁴⁷ Its transgressive eruptions into public life demanding a renewal of severity in suppression of the dangerously unruly feminine. The ambivalence of women's position within the violent social order of O'Connor's texts can be attributed to the ideological construction of the maternal body. In its idealised form as the 'white southern lady', the maternal body is the medium of legitimate production of heirs within a paternal genealogy and the guarantor of racial purity. That this ideal is disembodied, however, betrays the unease which

⁴⁷ The implied alliance between women and terroristic politics in O'Connor's texts, could be understood through Kristeva's diagnosis of a "paranoid type of counter-investment in an initially denied symbolic order": the subject becomes a "'possessed' agent" who returns to the symbolic order the violence she has suffered. Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 201 and 203.

attends its potentially unruly quality. In its demonised form, the corporeal and profligate maternal body reveals a latent potential to become a site of indiscriminate and illegitimate reproduction. It is the fear of ungoverned maternity which fuels the vigilance attending the defence of the chaste ideal - a defence whose true subject is not maternity but paternity, and whose ferocity can instantaneously turn on its subject.

The narratives of *The Bell Jar*, *Nights at the Circus* and of Carrington's short stories are largely concerned with the figure of the daughter. Caught between identification with the masculine values of a patriarchal world and the phantom of the repressed, corporeal and irrational body, the plight of the daughter has an exemplary quality for female subjectivity. However, O'Connor returns to the body which fully manifests the ambivalence of origin: the maternal body. This site of ultimate origin is discovered as the conditioning foundation of the daughter's dilemma. As Irigaray writes, "the mother woman remains the *place separated from its 'own' place*, a place deprived of a place of its own."⁴⁸ Possessed by an order which has dispossessed her, positioned as the origin but never dwelling within it, a woman's place is 'no place'. Hence, the return to the body in O'Connor's writing confronts the paradox encountered or inferred in the texts of Plath, Carter and Carrington. This paradox is a question of the place of women in the phallogentric symbolic order: reduced to materiality and posited prior to time and identity, woman is deprived of a place in history and language. Held captive in origin, she is nevertheless displaced.

⁴⁸ Irigaray, *Irigaray Reader* 169.

8. Conclusion

The 'return to the body' is a project which prompts an inquiry into origin. That the route of return should, in the course of this thesis, conclude with the texts of Flannery O'Connor might seem to compound rather than contest the impasse of origin at work in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. Indeed, in contrast to the utopian imagining of Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, O'Connor's narratives are seemingly imprisoned by the oppressive effects of the irrational. Furthermore, the nihilistic impulse which expresses a revolutionary energy in Leonora Carrington's texts, serves only to enforce a reactionary violence in O'Connor's texts.

However, to invoke the baleful powers of origin is not necessarily to succumb to its logic. The 'return to the body' prompts an interpretive strategy which does not seek to dispel the unease generated by these texts so much as to articulate an encounter with their profound ambivalence. It is in the horror of origin which pervades O'Connor's texts that the problematic status of the body is given its most compelling expression. That there is no place for O'Connor within the dominant terms of feminist criticism suggests that the impasse encountered in her texts is not merely a symptom of the condition of origin: it is an impasse of discourse. By demonstrating the implication of the body in the violent origins of identity and history, O'Connor's texts exemplify the necessity of a theoretical reading which can account both for subjectivity and politics, psychoanalysis and history.

To make a return is to undertake a reparation for a wrong or to redress an injury. I would suggest that the 'return to the body,' far from being theoretically or politically regressive, potentially constitutes such an ethical gesture. It is my contention that the 'return to the body' might yield invaluable returns for feminist inquiry; it offers to liberate not only the body, as a site of theoretical interest, but the terms of feminist discourse itself, from an impasse of origin.

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